How to Catch a Fallen Star

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How to Catch a Fallen Star

by Humanities_Handbag, Invader_Sam

Summary

AKA Five Times Shadow almost joined the group but didn't + One Time he stayed for good

Or: Tom recovers, the Wachowski's heal, Sonic tries to find a different type of shadow, and Stone should probably consider getting a parenting book.

Notes

The response to the other fics in this series was just so incredible right away. We saw the movie together and Invader_Sam texted me the next day to show the amount of Kudos we received and it was just remarkable. How could we not be inspired to continue the series?

That being said, we hope you enjoy this new installment. We're super excited about it and cannot wait to see what you guys think!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The elevator dinged softly as the door slid open, revealing the ICU on the sixth floor of the London hospital.

None of them moved.

Beyond them, a nurse peered over the top of her station, eyebrows shooting sky high as she caught sight of them.

Still, none of them moved.

The door started to slide closed again. Knuckles stuck out a hand, catching one side. “Brothers,” he said, though his usual commanding baritone wavered over the word. “We must venture forth.”

Beside him, Tails twisted one of his tails in both hands. “What if-”

“Father is deceptively strong.” Knuckles cut off the question before it could begin. “So now we should…” He gestured and stepped forward, Tails trailing just behind him.

It took them only a few steps to realize someone was missing.

Just behind them, still outside of the elevator doors, Sonic stood watching them. His shoulders were hunched and every second that ticked by seemed to shrink him smaller and smaller.

Tails reached towards him. “Sonic?”

Sonic opened his mouth. Closed it. Then he shook his head. “What if they don’t want us anymore?”

Tails drew the end of his tail up to his chin, muffling a whimper.

Knuckles had stopped mid-step, arm half outstretched, jaw slack. “That- that notion is *preposterous* .”

Sonic pulled back. “Then they wouldn’t want *me* anymore. That’s *not* . I’m the reason-”

“If anyone is to blame, it is *I* .” Knuckles touched his chest. “I was the first to provoke the far-more-formidable hedgehog, and then I failed to subdue him.”

“But I started this! I came here first and-”

“Wachowskis?” They all looked up to see that the nurse had come out from behind her station and was standing over them. Her nametag said CLARA and was decorated in faded stickers. When they all stared at her she asked again. “You’re the Wachowski boys, right?”

They looked at one another, hesitating. Knuckles took the lead and nodded.

She gestured over her shoulder. “They’re in room number seven. This way.” And without waiting for acknowledgement, she started walking.

They went down two long hallways with dark windows. Closed rooms and curtains. In the center of the small labyrinth, Clara paused at a nurses station and whispered something over the counter. Another nurse nodded and picked up the phone, and as they followed Clara down another hallway Sonic heard *they’re coming now* and stared at the tiles passing his feet on the floor.

Maddie was standing outside what must have been room number seven. She’d traded her stolen G.U.N. uniform for pink scrubs and her hair was still in a ponytail. And as she turned and took in the sight of them, her expression was just as unreadable as it had been as the ambulance doors had slammed shut, like she was catching up to them standing there in front of her.

Tails whimpered again, and Sonic shrank further into his shoulders.

Knuckles drew himself up ramrod straight and cleared his throat. “The threat to Earth has been neutralized. We have come to see how Fa-” He faltered. “...how the Lord of Donuts is faring. If, er, if that is amenable, Mo-” Again the word caught in his throat. He lowered his eyes to the floor and the correction came out shakily, “M-Mrs. Wachowski.”

It was like watching a stopped clock tick back to life. Maddie’s brows drew down, the lines of her forehead dipping. She shook her head, blinked, and stared at the three of them again. In the span of a breath, she seemed to finally see them.

“Sorry.” Her voice was pitched upwards and strained. She fluttered a hand uselessly beside her head before dropping it down. “Sorry, say that again?”

Knuckles’ jaw twitched.

Sonic stepped forward instead. He was still looking at the floor, gaze fixed on the ash speckling her shoes. There was a burn on her ankle. His eyes burned and he blinked hard. When he did finally find his voice, he could only mumble. Anything more than that and he was sure he’d burst into tears.

He didn’t think she needed that.

“Um.” He cleared his throat. Maddie’s shoes moved closer so she could better hear him. “We wanted to check on… Tom. Mr. Wachowski. If that would be alright, Mrs. Wachowski?”

Her shoes didn’t move.

“We can come back later,” he offered quietly. “Or go and get stuff for you? I still have a key to our- to your house.”

It took a beat, but her shoes did finally move. Her knees joined them a moment later. And then two hands were cupping his face and tilting it up until he couldn’t avoid her eyes

anymore.

It only took that, and his resolve shattered across the linoleum. “It’s *my fault* . I didn’t know if you or D- if you or *Tom* would want to ever see me again!”

Maddie jerked back, hands still hovering about Sonic’s face. She opened her mouth.

Knuckles beat her to it. “ *I* should be the one to leave! Sonic was there first. I initiated the fight. If I had *talked* like you taught me-”

“I started everything!” Sonic hated that Maddie’s face was mushing into a wet blur. Hated more how he could feel his face getting wet and his nose clogging. “If I had stayed in the stupid *woods* Tom would be okay!”

Tails was hovering just behind him, but he didn’t have to turn around to know the youngest was crying. “I don’t have anywhere to go!” Tails’ voice was practically drowning. “I don’t *want* to go.”

“They shouldn’t.” Sonic wanted to sink into the earth. “I should, not *them* .”

Maddie grabbed his shoulders. “Sonic!”

Sonic shook his head until he felt dizzy with it. He said something, he was sure of it, but it came out in a garbled, choked mess. He couldn’t stop the hands from grabbing him if he’d tried. Or maybe he didn’t want to. Not when he was being pulled blindly forward with enough force to have him stumble face first into something that smelled like ash and laundry detergent and lavender. Arms clamped around him and squeezed hard enough that it should have hurt, but it only made him burrow deeper. His own arms went out and clutched at the back of Maddie’s borrowed scrubs.

“You shouldn’t want me.” His voice was muffled against the too sterile, stiff fabric. Even under the scrubs and the soap they’d probably had her scrub down with, she still carried the lavender lotion Tom had bought her in bulk for a birthday present without realizing she’d hated it.

Thomas Michael Wachowski, she’d said over Sonic’s peals of laughter. *I was being polite when you got me this the first time!*

How was I supposed to know that! Her husband had replied frantically from across a small sea of torn wrapping paper before telling her bashfully that the bulk purchase came with a big fat “no refunds” policy.

So she’d rolled her eyes and told him she’d get used to it.

Sonic had a sneaky suspicion she’d grown to like it, even as she groaned and moaned about it every morning while Tom had listened fondly.

And even if she didn’t, Sonic did. The sheets smelled like it when she got up, and it stayed on his clothes after a good snuggle.

It made his eyes burn that much more and he breathed in greedily between choked noises trying to be words.

Her arms left his back, one and then the other, and he was about to panic until each was replaced by the warm body of one of his brothers, the both of them shaking just as hard as he was. Tails was wailing at his right shoulder, while Knuckles' stifled sobs rumbled at his right ear.

And over all of that, Maddie was murmuring, "My boys… oh my god, my boys…"

At some point, Sonic's legs gave out and he sank to the floor, the whole little huddle sinking with him. At another point, there was motion above their heads and a whispered *'thank you'* from Maddie as a big box of tissues was set down beside them. But it would be a lot of points past that before any of them would let go enough to use them.

But eventually the monsoon of tears lessened to a drizzle and Maddie took the opportunity to wipe each of their faces. Tails first, and he got a forehead kiss that drew him back from the depths. "You," she told him, soft and firm, "are not going *anywhere* but home with me. You got it?"

Eyes shining, he sighed out "Mommy" like a prayer and fell into her side again.

She turned to Knuckles next, who made a move to shy away from the kleenex but wouldn't actually step back so he got his face dried even as he cringed. A kiss to the side of his muzzle had his face relaxing. Then she tweaked his nose. "Don't ever call me 'Mrs. Wachowski' again, mister."

"Never ever." He shook his head then buried his muzzle in her shoulder.

She looked from her youngest on her right to her eldest on her left and then let her gaze settle on the boy in the middle. "I think I need more hands." With some effort, she scooted Tails so he was in her lap, which freed her up to snag more tissues.

Sonic had stumbled back once he'd gotten through the worst of his tears, seemingly having decided to leave her to the other two. When she reached for him he wanted to move forward on his own more than anything, but his feet were planted in place. He sniffled and wiped his eyes off on the back of his wrist. "M'okay," he rasped. "I don't need it."

"That's fine," she responded. "I don't care." She managed to wrap her fingers around his hand, tugging him until he was close enough for her to clean his face. He made a halfhearted attempt to duck his head, but it only lasted so long before she was drying his face as best as she could. It only did so much, but she didn't seem to mind, more intent on just keeping him in place than anything else. The balled up tissue was tossed somewhere besides her.

For another long moment they sat in the quiet, taking up the whole hallway.

Then Maddie sighed. "You know, I knew- I *knew* I messed up this afternoon. I just didn't realize how bad."

Two of the three of them shifted, attention undivided.

“Everything was happening so quickly. And there were sirens and ambulances and so many people and...” She winced. “It’s not an excuse. It *isn’t* . Just. It was all happening so fast, and I don’t think- Actually I think that was it. I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s shock, I think?” Murmured Tails, who clung to facts like a life preserver, and was holding on for dear life in that hallway.

Knuckles nodded. “I have seen many a warrior face that battle.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, softly, “maybe I should have faced it a little louder.” Her eyes were still on Sonic, who was curled into himself in front of her, looking towards the balled up tissue sitting near a plastic chair. Thankfully the tether of her hand on his hadn’t been broken and she squeezed her fingers around his. “Then we got here and it just *hit* me. We watched the news. Didn’t turn it off once. We wouldn’t have been - neither of us would’ve been - if anything had happened. I just… We couldn’t stop thinking about it. If that had been our last minutes with you-”

“ *We* .” Knuckles caught the word midair. “Mr - *Father* is alright?”

Even as she nodded, her eyes stayed on Sonic. Sonic still had his eyes fixed elsewhere, arms wrapped tight around himself. “Banged up. Some broken bones and a concussion, so he’ll be on bedrest for a while. And he’s a little more fragile than they would’ve liked. He wouldn’t let them give him much for the pain, not if it’d put him to sleep. We both wanted to make sure you were alright.” She looked ready to cry herself. “It doesn’t look like you are.”

“I’m fine,” said Sonic.

“You don’t need to be,” said Maddie. “We weren’t. And then you come in here talking about how you should go…?”

Sonic’s muzzle quivered and he bit down on the inside of his cheek. “You’d be okay,” he offered weakly. “You’d be better.”

She shook her head and squeezed his hand again. “No, baby. Your dad and I? I don’t think we’d’ve survived that. We both need you. All of you. More than anything. C’mon.” She stood with some difficulty (Tails didn’t want to get out of her lap and Knuckles had a death grip on her side), but she didn’t let go of Sonic’s hand. “He’s probably going crazy in there-” she said, leading them slowly and awkwardly to the door. “-knowing you’re out here and he can’t get to- *Thomas!* ”

Through the open door, they could see him, one leg over the side of the hospital bed, holding onto the I.V. stand with the arm that wasn’t in a cast and attempting to hoist himself up. The minute Maddie cried his name, he stopped trying, sitting back down with a strained smile. One leg stayed swinging uselessly over the side of the bed railing. “It’s about damn time!”

“You’re not supposed to be up!”

“Well, you should’ve thought of that when you were hogging them all to yourself in the hall.”

“Oh for pete’s sake, I wasn’t-”

“Yeah, yeah, tell it to the judge.” He tried to wave her off but chose the broken arm to do it with and winced. He shook it off, let go of the I.V. stand, and extended his unbroken arm. “So. What’s a guy gotta do to get a hug in this joint, hm?”

Tails was off like a shot, literally flying into Tom’s chest (Maddie’s warning of *‘watch his ribs!’* going unheard) with a soft *thud* and more tears. Tom dipped his face into the tuft of fur between the kit’s ears.

It took some nudging from Maddie, but Knuckles approached as well, albeit more carefully. He climbed up onto the bed and sat with hands on his knees, until Tom stretched his good arm around his shoulders, and he let himself lean in.

“I promise I won’t break,” Tom told his eldest fondly. “I’m not a total weakling.”

Knuckles shook his head. “You are very strong, Father.”

“Huh.” Tom snorted. “That’s a first. Remind me to get thrown around more often.” He glanced over Knuckles’ head towards Maddie and his first kid, who was staring at the floor, hand still in Maddie’s. He gave her a questioning look. She offered a complicated one back, eyes sad.

The same nurse who had brought the boys and then later tissues put a pause to their silent conversation, bustling in with two orderlies behind her. They were carrying square frames that extended with clanks and plastic creaks.

“We thought it would be better if you had something nicer than chairs to sleep on,” she told Maddie and then Tom as she reached his bed, fiddling with wires. “It won’t be the Ritz, but it’ll be better than those recliners, I can promise you that.” She paused to beam down at the two boys sitting on either side of him. “You know, your father told us *all* about you. Feel like I know you myself, now.” She pointed to Tails. “You’re the one that fixed his car? Tails, right?”

Tails perked up. “I *did* .” His smile faded. “He wouldn’t let me boost the engine though.”

“Oh woe is you,” muttered Tom, offering his arm for Clara to change the IV.

“And you’re Knuckles?”

Knuckles offered a quiet nod.

“I hear you’re quite the protector.”

He shuffled a little closer to Tom, watching Clara’s hands with an eagle eye as she inserted a new tube to the needle already fixed below tape. “I do what I can, Healer Clara.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to consult you if we need anything for your father, then.” She fussed with Tom’s pillows and then stepped away. Behind her, the orderlies were dressing the cots down with scratchy looking blankets and thin, papery pillows. She pulled off her plastic gloves with a snap and brushed off her hands.

And then her eyes found Sonic.

Maddie swallowed and glanced down at her son, and then back to Clara with a helpless shrug.

“Well, hello there.” Much less exuberant than with the two other aliens occupying their father’s hospital bed, Clara approached Sonic carefully and took a knee. “You’re the baseball star.”

Sonic’s jaw ticked.

“I got to see an album’s worth of pictures, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” said Tom, watching Sonic carefully. “Never miss a game.”

Maddie squeezed Sonic’s hand. “At least as much as we can help it.”

“They missed one because we were beset by a foul parasite,” Knuckles helpfully provided.

“Hate those,” Clara nodded in sympathy.

Tom chuckled. “What day is it? Saturday? Are we missing one right now?”

“It’s Tuesday,” Maddie said. “Technically they’re all missing school.”

“Shit. Did you-”

“I called the district. They didn’t have a ‘save the world from blowing up’ option in the app.”

“They really gotta add that.”

“Right?”

“ *Stop it!”*

Clara was the only one who jumped back when the spark popped, Maddie and Tom stopping their back and forth to stare at the blue hedgehog huddled beside Maddie, the light off his quills already fading.

“This isn’t *normal!* Why are you acting like this is normal!”

“Honey,” Maddie began.

Sonic took a step away. “Tom got hurt, Maddie! Tom got *hurt* because I had to come to this stupid planet and get into this stupid fight and you could’ve lost him because I couldn’t control my stupid temper! Why aren’t you *angry!* You shouldn’t even want me around, but

you're just pretending like everything is normal, and it isn't! Just *stop* it. *Please* stop and just-just tell me to go or yell or something!"

Tom sat up in bed. Tails scuttled towards the edge and Knuckles took a step away to give their father more space. He couldn't move much but he could shift enough to at least prop himself against the pillows and frown down at Sonic, who looked defiantly back.

Tom shook his head. "The only thing that's not *normal* is you calling me Tom. Because I'm *'Dad'* and she's *'Mom'* and we've got the paperwork to prove it. And there's nothing anyone, not even you, could ever do to change that."

Sonic balled up his fists, glared harder, and then burst into tears.

"Can you please come up here before I break something else trying to get out of the bed. I've been waiting all day to give my kid a hug." Tom looked ready to jump off the hospital bed and fight anyone who stopped him, and so Clara was the first to usher everything quickly along with a clap of her hands.

Maddie barely had to do anything to drag him up towards Tom. Sonic went without question and let Tom practically snap him into a one armed hold, held tight and flopping down without protest. Tom muttered something into the soft fur at the side of his son's face and pressed a firm kiss between his ears. If Sonic replied, no one could hear it. Knuckles was already clamoring onto the bed again with Tails clinging onto his eldest brother's shoulders.

Clara cooed and looked at Maddie who was busy rubbing Sonic's back with a steady hand. "I think," she whispered, "that your wee boys need a nap and something to nibble on."

"I think you're right," Maddie whispered back. "I think we all could."

Clara wasn't wrong, and it wasn't long before Sonic was fighting sleep with a sandwich clutched in each hand, Tails fiddling tiredly with packs of peanuts and Knuckles dozing off into a pudding cup.

At one point, Maddie left and was back less than half an hour later with plastic bags full of t-shirts plastered in double decker red busses and another bag from a few of the nurses on Clara's team who were more than happy to offer toothbrushes and enough wipes to clean a small country.

"One at a time," Maddie said, lifting a half dozing Tails from where he was slumped on the end of Tom's bed.

Tom tried to lift himself up. "I can help, hon."

"You can help by staying there," she said back, ignoring the way he flopped down with a pout. "We need to get used to a one person bedtime routine, at least until you aren't packaged with a fragile stamp." She plucked wipes from their container and began scrubbing around Tails' face, ignoring his mumbled protests, only pausing to say, "I'm coming for you next, Knuckles."

There was almost a desperate familiarity to the bedtime ritual and Maddie seemed to cling to it; wiping out Tails' ears and across his fur, putting a toothbrush into his paw, pushing him towards a little sink on the hospital room wall. Later she might have said that it was nothing more than rote memory, if only to avoid talking about the moments spent staring at a television screen with her husband, the two of them clinging to one another helplessly, hollowed out and afraid that the last moments with their children had been wasted on silence and fear.

Knuckles passed her by after sliding off the bed, careful not to jostle Tom's leg. "I will handle it, Mother. You have enough on your hands."

Her smile was tired and a little sad. "You're sure?"

"You tend to Tails. I can take care of this myself."

"You saved the world, sweetheart. I know you can."

And he did, to an extent, but still wandered up to her almost shyly after he'd shrugged on a t-shirt and shucked his sneakers, letting her help clean out his ears and double check for missed dirt and ash beneath layers of fur. It was a small kindness that she took all too happily. Not that it was much of a chore. Knuckles' soaked up the love with all the efficiency of a thousand-percent-muscled sponge.

Still, Maddie took it for what it was and bundled him close after tossing away wipes and cutting the tag off his shirt sleep shirt.

"Thank you, baby."

He pressed his face into the side of her neck, looking all too content to stay there forever.

"You know, no matter how busy or scared I am, I always want you with me, right?"

"Because I am Mother's Best Boy?"

"You sure are," she said, squeezing him tight. "Even if you can take care of yourself, and even though you're stronger than all of us and out saving planets. I still want to take care of you any way I can."

Somehow, even being one thousand percent muscle, Knuckles sounded small when he said, "I will always want your help, mother. Please do not stop?"

"Not planning on it."

" And, though I know it is not customary at home… perhaps tonight, you would perform the ritual of tucking in?"

"Of course I will," she murmured and hugged him tighter, only pulling back to smudge away toothpaste from the corner of his mouth with her thumb. "Go say goodnight to your dad. And send over your brother. It's his turn and I know he'll wiggle away if I don't wrangle him quick."

“Yes, Mother.” He rolled his shoulders as he approached the hospital bed. “Come, Father’s Little Man. We must wash away the vestiges of battle before we may sleep the slumber of the victorious.”

Sonic grumbled drowsily and clung, but Tom pried his fingers from his gown and Knuckles was more than strong enough to heave him up and off the bed like a grumpy ragdoll. The middle sibling deposited near their mother, Knuckles wandered back to Tom for a goodnight hug and kiss.

Sonic was less of a pain than he usually was about the necessities of a bedtime routine. He was old enough to do it himself (with the occasional times they’d needed to wrestle him into a bath after baseball practice, the hedgehog stubbornly refusing anything less than flopping headfirst into bed, caked on dirt and all), but he actually allowed Maddie to scrub away at his face and corral him to the bathroom with instructions to brush his teeth for a whole minute.

She was finishing her goodnights to Tails, who was asleep the minute he sat on the spare cot, when Sonic wandered out. He was still eerily quiet, waiting his turn, and when she handed him a sleeping shirt the hedgehog made barely an effort to get it on before he was passing it to her and raising his arms.

She laughed quietly. “I haven’t seen you this happy to let me help in… I actually don’t know if you ever were.”

Sonic tipped forward and mumbled something into her shirt.

“What was that, baby?”

“I don’t want to sleep on a cot.”

“They’re not that uncomfortable. And it’s only for a night.”

He shook his head. It was almost a relief to see his stubborn streak peeking out.

“Okay. You wanna stick with your dad?”

He mumbled something else that she took as a yes, but refused to unlatch his hands from her shirt. It was a little sweet. A little heartbreaking, too.

“I just have to get Knuckles settled. Sounds good?”

Sonic didn’t answer, but he didn’t let go either.

Knuckles was a hug and a kiss and a goodnight, with a promise that she’d be there in the morning. He called her Mother with a question mark at the end one too many times for her liking, but at least he was calling her anything, and so she took it as a win even as he told her “Goodnight. Mother?” and promptly passed out.

Not that Sonic was much better. Maddie did her best not to let her emotions show too loudly when he hesitated lying down next to Tom until her husband finally reached out with his good arm and said, “bud, c’mon, we’re losing light over here.”

And then it was just the three of them, with Knuckles and Tails snoring and muttering in their sleep. Maddie had extended the one comfortable recliner in the room besides the bed, and Sonic had settled stiffly between her and Tom.

Another win, such as it was, was that Sonic resisted sleep just as hard as ever.

“Dad.”

“Hm?”

“I was on the moon.”

“No kidding.” A pause. “Wait, the *moon* -moon?”

“Uh huh.”

“The moon we all just saw get lasered?”

“I was off the moon by then. Also that was kinda our fault.”

“It was a pretty big laser, bud. *Some* thing was bound to get zapped. Just glad it wasn’t you.”

A longer pause, and then. “Dad?”

“Mm?”

“Eggman’s gone.”

“I know, bud. We saw his livestream.”

“He livestreamed?”

“Yeah. Had some weirdly nice things to say to somebody named Stone.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. Seems like he switched sides right at the end there. Better late than never, right?”

“I guess so.”

Maddie signalled that it was time to actually go to sleep by reaching up and switching off the last light in the room.

Not that their middle child got the hint.

“Dad?”

“Mn?”

“Shadow’s gone too.”

“Who?”

“The other hedgehog. The one who-” He swallowed. “He, uh, he switched sides too.”

Tom blew out a long breath. “Damn.”

Maddie stretched her hand out to rub Sonic’s back. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

“It just- Dad, it *sucks* .”

“It does.”

“I thought- I thought maybe, when it was all over, we could-” The hedgehog’s fist clung tight to Tom’s hospital gown. “But he stayed with the cannon. I couldn’t hold on anymore. If I’d been stronger, maybe he’d-”

“Hey, hey, none of that.” Tom brought his good hand up, rubbing the boy’s ears. “You did more these last two days than *any* one should *ever* have to do. You think Mom or I could fly to the moon? Or *anyone* from G.U.N.? I don’t ever wanna hear you say you didn’t do enough, or weren’t fast enough or strong enough of any of that. You are *amazing* , you hear me? And what happened today wasn’t the fault of anybody in this room.”

Sonic shrugged. He toyed with a loose bit of plaster around Tom’s arm. “Do you ever think…” He swallowed, Tom and Maddie waiting patiently while he sorted out his thoughts into neater rows. Finally Sonic blinked and dragged in a breath. “Do you ever think,” he tried again, “of what things would be like if I hadn’t showed up in your garage?”

Maddie’s hand stalled on his back. She looked towards Tom. He looked back. “Yeah,” he said, slowly. “I think we do, sometimes.”

Sonic nodded. He blinked and sniffled. His eyes were swimming. “I think. Maybe if I hadn’t… maybe things would be. I dunno. *Better?”*

Maddie’s hand began moving again in gentle circles along his spine. “Better for *who* , sweetheart? Because it wouldn’t have been better for the world. Those weapons would still have been built with or without you. Shadow would still be out, but there’d be no one to talk to him. Things might’ve been worse for all you know.”

“I guess. But…” Sonic’s jaw twitched. “Maybe you’d get to have a… different life? A better one?”

“Says who?” Maddie got up from the chair, Tom moving to the side carefully to make room until both he and Maddie were on the bed, Sonic squarely between them. “Because I’m not saying that. And neither is Tom.”

“Wasn’t even a thought,” Tom said with a shake of his head. “I don’t like thinking about it, actually. Because then we wouldn't have you. And that’s worse than anything I can make up.”

“Way, way worse,” said Maddie. She reached over and dragged her hand across Sonic’s face, smudging away tears he was trying furiously to hide. “So can you just let us be your

parents?"

Sonic sniffled. He twisted until he was burrowed between them. His voice was rough when he said, "I guess." There was a beat before he added. "It's probably for the best, anyway. You guys would be hopeless without me around."

"Oh, absolutely," said Tom, leaning down as best as he could to laugh a kiss between his son's ears while Maddie rolled her eyes above her son's head. "Completely hopeless."

Sonic managed to sleep for a whole two hours before nurses were back in the room. They did their best to be quiet, but Sonic was all live wires he'd had yet to tamp down.

"What are you giving him," he nearly snapped at a nurse that was *not* Clara.

Tom answered before she could. "The good stuff, bud, so reign it in."

"The good- *what good stuff?"*

"The stuff that keeps me from saying words I should *not* be saying in front of you when I start to feel my bones again."

Maddie took longer to wake up but did eventually drag Sonic off the bed and onto the recliner with her before he began interrogating the nurses about every single bit of medical jargon passed between them. "Just let them do their jobs, honey."

" *Fine* ," Sonic grumbled. "But I'm watching them."

"I'm sure they really appreciate that," Maddie deadpanned.

To their credit, the night shift nurses were smooth and efficient and quite used to protective children of sick or injured parents, so they were in and out of the room in a matter of minutes. And Tom *did* appear more comfortable when they left. So much so that he started to sit up in bed.

"Whoa, whoa," Maddie put a hand out. "What do you need, babe?"

"To stretch my legs. And Combos. I'd give *anything* for a bag of Combos right now."

"Don't think they sell those here."

"I can get them!" Sonic was off the recliner, reaching for his shoes.

"Sweetheart, I mean they literally *don't sell them* here. You'd have to find a special store and everything's closed-"

"I get that, Mom! But if I get some good speed going I bet I can get across the Atlantic and-"

"Sonic, you are not *running across the ocean* for Combos."

Tom was looking even more comfortable and waved a hand her way. “Madeline,” he drawled, eyes glazed. “My favorite wife. Let’s hear our blue boy out.”

“Thomas, you’re stoned. Lie back down.”

“And you’re no fun. *You* lie down.”

Maddie rolled her eyes, muttered something about *men* and *drugs* and reached for her purse. Out in the hall something buzzed, and a flash of light glinted behind the frosted glass of the door. Sonic's attention barely wavered towards it before he was looking away. The hospital was older, like Tom's office back home. The cheap florescent lights flickered there, too. “Thankfully one of us remembered to exchange money,” she said, and handed Sonic a few coins. “Go find some snacks at the vending machine.”

“ *There are vending machines across the ocean,* ” Thomas whispered, conspiratorially. “ *Don’t tell your Mom I told you that.* ”

“Sonic, don’t you dare-”

He eased out of her arms, a genuine smile on his face for the first time since they’d arrived. “I’ll just go down the hall. Promise.” He padded to the door, reached for the handle-

-when there was another buzzing sound, and another flash of light.

Ears pricked, he listened, but the hallway was quiet. Quills tingling, he pulled the door open a crack. Empty.

Well, almost empty.

At the threshold, having tipped over as the door was pulled inward, was a bag of pizza-flavored Combos.

“What the…?” Stepping over the snacks, Sonic peered out into the hall.

To the left, nothing.

To the right-

Black fur, singed and ashy.

Brown eyes, wide and uncertain.

A soot-stained glove clutching the far corner.

“Holy-” Sonic took a step into the hall.

“Baby what is it?” Maddie called.

“Mom! Mom it’s-” His eyes flickered her way, and when they flicked back to the hall, there was only a flash of red light dissipating. “No!” He zipped to the corner, but there wasn’t

anything left but a smudged, gray handprint on the wall. “Damn it!”

“Sonic?” Maddie was leaning out the doorway now, craning her neck. Her foot hit the snack bag and the crinkling drew her eye. “What in the world?” She dipped to pick it up. “How…?”

“Mom!” Sonic was at her side in a flash, grabbing her hand and yanking her down the hall. “Mom, he’s alive! He was *here!* Look!”

Bewildered, she crouched to peer at the print. “Wait, you mean-”

“Shadow!” He shook her arm by the hand, keeping his voice low. “He was *just* here! I saw him!”

“Where did he go?” She looked around the corner.

“I dunno. He teleported away before I could even get close.”

“He can *teleport* ?”

“Yeah, Mom, I bet that’s how he got those.” Sonic poked at the bag of Combos. “Holy sh-crap. He’s *alive* .”

Maddie gave the handprint one more look, chewing her bottom lip. “I wish he’d stayed. That explosion was *huge* . He probably needs to be here more than Dad does.”

“Maybe he’ll come back! We should go ask Dad to ask for more impossible-to-get snacks.”

She hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t know if that’ll work twice. But maybe in the morning we can make a plan. For now,” she waved the snack bag in her hand. “We should go give these to your father before he tries to get out of bed again.”

“ *Maddie, I’m standing!”*

“For f- *something’s* sake, Thomas, get back into-”

“*Are those Combos! Did my boy become blue Jesus for my Combos!?”*

“Thomas, I *swear* .” Maddie let out a sigh. “Bring those to your father before he hurts himself,” she told Sonic. “I’m going to wrangle him down.” She paused and knelt down, squeezing his shoulder. “We’ll figure it out, okay? We’ll help him. But let’s just make sure we’re all together first.” She reached out a fist. “Sounds good?”

He looked back down the hallway. “Yeah,” he said, looking back to his mother. He reached out his fist and touched it to hers. “Sounds good.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> We just want to say thank you so much. The reception to the first chapter has been nothing short or remarkable, and we appreciate each and every one of you for your kind words and support ❤️ We hope you all had lovely holidays, and here's to more disaster hedgehogs in the new year.
>
> Onto the next chapter we go!

Stone wasn't sure how the solicitor found him, but he'd only spent one night at a crappy roadside motel before there was a knock on the door and a man in a blue suit and an actual briefcase was standing on the other side. He took off his blue hat and tucked it beneath his arm.

"Agent Stone?"

Stone had opened the door as far as the chain lock would allow and glared through the crack. "Who's asking?"

The man didn't seem put off by the prickliness and shoved his hand through the small opening. There was a card pinched between his fingers.

"Name's Pete."

Stone looked down at the card. It was embossed in gold filigree. Probably to make up for the pitiful description in the middle.

PETE

SOLICITOR

"Do you have a last name?" Stone asked, tiredly.

Pete laughed in the way people did when their last name tended to send out pings to authorities. "Let's just stick with Pete," he said. "That sound good, Imaad?"

Stone narrowed his eyes. "How about we just stick with Stone."

Pete laughed again. "Fair enough."

Soon enough, Stone's awful hotel bed was littered in papers while Pete went over a dizzying amount of details to information Stone never knew existed.

Specifically, the pictures he was handed of a mustachioed cabin surrounded by trees. There was a field of wildflowers in the distance and what looked like the beginnings of a trail beyond a firepit and a two person teak wood bench hanging from a tree branch.

“What is this?”

“It’s a house,” said Pete. He paused. “Well. Let me start over. It *is* a house, technically, but the way this thing is fortified, it might as well be a military bunker. It might not look like much, but this building is outfitted with enough traps and explosives to start a small war. Or end it.” He passed over a list of said traps and weapons in a neatly stapled packet. Blueprints on the back page were dotted in circles and arrows pointing to the charming redwood balusters housing heat seeking rockets and trap doors posing as garden stones leading to underground iron barred cells.

“There’s just a few things to sign and then we can make it all official and you can be on your way.” A pile of papers was shoved into one hand, a pen into his other.

Stone looked it over. His breath caught when he saw the other name outlined in the first document detailing the designer.

Ivo Robotnik’s name was on the first paper. And the second. And when he looked at the pictures again with fresh, misty eyes, he noticed the signature on the bottom right he’d missed before. He reached out and traced it. There was a dip from where a pen had been pressed too hard.

Stone cleared his throat. “So, he had a house? And you’re coming to me to, what? Help sell it? Clear it out? I don’t have the space. And he isn’t my boss anymore, you know that, right?” It hurt to say, the words bouncing around the hollow part in him he hadn’t quite figured out how to fill.

Pete shook his head. “Hardly. Ivo hired me to take care of the details. I oversaw the build personally.” He reached into his briefcase for a manilla folder and slid it across the bedspread. “And when it was all done, I was always supposed to give this to you.”

It didn’t take long after taking out the papers to understand what he was holding.

“A deed?” His voice sounded far away and too loud in his own head.

“A deed,” Pete confirmed. “That you’ll need to sign soon, because I do have other clients to get to tonight.”

Stone shook his head. “I don’t understand. He has a house. And now that he’s gone, you’re just. What? Giving it to me?”

“I don’t think you’re listening,” said Pete. “He *built* a house. That’s all. Ownership is a whole different matter.”

Stone opened his mouth. Closed it. Looked down at the paperwork again. Really, *really* looked at it.

Behind a burn swimming beneath his lashes, the deed and blueprints and property surveys all began to look a lot like love letters.

“Oh,” he said, finally. “He built me a house.”

“He built you a house,” Pete confirmed. “There’s a letter he wrote somewhere in the final documents. I’ll send it over once this is processed. But from what I read, I think this was a… nest egg, of sorts. For you. For the both of you, but mostly for you when whatever your job was ended.” He waved a hand around before adding, “not that I need to know what the job was. I don’t ask my clients questions.”

If he noticed the tears hanging off Stone’s chin, he was good enough not to comment. Or maybe he wasn’t paid enough to.

Sniffling, wiping his sleeve across his face, Stone signed his name on each and every dotted line.

“There’s a car outside waiting for you,” Pete said once he’d collected the paperwork and stood. “It’ll take you to your new home. The passwords are all outlined in the dossier. The driver will give that to you on the way.” He put back on his hat. “Agent Stone,” he said again, and walked out the door.

Stone knew he’d never see the man again.

Shadow was lost.

Not in the physical sense. He knew he was in the mountains of Montana in the United States.

But he was lost nonetheless.

In the short span of his life that he was conscious for and could remember, he had always had a purpose. Being a lab rat wasn’t a *great* purpose, and being solely hellbent on revenge was even worse, but at least he’d had a plan. He knew what his days would look like.

And he had *thought* that those days would have been ended by now.

But instead, he’d woken up in a crater of his own making, somewhere in the Canadian Rockies. His noble, final act of sacrifice hadn’t been so final after all.

And now he was lost.

Lost, and hurt, and hungry.

The first thing he’d done, upon waking, was seek out the other hedgehog.

Sonic.

Still in London.

With his *family* .

Family that Shadow had hurt.

He hadn't meant that. He hadn't wanted that. Well. Maybe he had. Maybe he'd been so blinded by his rage and grief that he'd wanted nothing more than to make everyone hurt that same way he had.

But, he'd learned the hard way, that didn't make anything any better.

In fact, it had made him feel worse.

And, sitting outside the hospital room door, listening to the humans comfort the hedgehog and his friends, had made him feel even worse still.

He didn't know what to do with the awful feeling, so when the male human had made an impossible request, he'd fulfilled it. He'd almost knocked, mind spinning with what he could possibly *say* to these people who were probably furious at him. Or worse, *frightened* of him.

In the end, when the doorknob had turned, he'd panicked and teleported away, but found he couldn't go far. Just far enough, he thought. Just around the corner.

He wanted to see how they accepted his gift. Was desperate to.

So desperate, it turned out, that he hadn't hid as well as he'd meant to.

The shock on Sonic's face when their eyes met wasn't a surprise at all.

The *elation* , however…

And the sudden rush of shame at being on the receiving end of that elation was what had him teleporting again, much further away that time.

This time he would stay away.

Or at least out of sight.

The sun was rising as the car pulled up the gravel driveway and stopped fifty feet back from the cabin. The driver tapped the divider window behind him. "Need your eyes, sir."

"Excuse me?"

By way of clarification, the tinted window on his left rolled down, revealing a slim post topped with a retinal scanner.

He leaned forward, let the red light sweep his face, and then the little post made a soft *ping* and the car rolled farther forward. As it came to a stop at the front porch (whose railings really did bear a striking resemblance to a mustache he knew far too well), his door opened on its own, as did the trunk.

“Key code’s in the folder, sir.” The man behind the wheel was doing his best not to show how anxious he was to be off the property, but his best wasn’t great. Another time, Stone might’ve felt the urge to ridicule, to act superior.

Now?

Now he just scooped up the bundle of papers and the duffel back on the seat beside him and shuffled out of the car. He even left a twenty dollar bill in the cupholder.

There were two more trash bags full of belongings in the trunk and the moment he’d heaved them out and onto the gravel, the car was moving again. At a speed that was somehow both urgent and forcibly casual, the driver vanished back down the mountain road.

And again, he was alone.

Alone, with the house that Ivo had built.

He stared at it, and it stared back at him.

The windows were dark, but as he climbed the porch steps, arms laden with the sad remains of his life, they lightened. He froze, awaiting one of the numerous defences he’d read about to spring on him. Instead, a small screen above the doorbell flickered to life.

WELCOME HOME, AGENT STONE, it read.

And then the front door swung open, beckoning.

He stumbled over the threshold, trashbags catching in the doorway. The moment they were through, the door closed behind him, the lock softly clicking back into place. He let the bags drop to the floor. There was no longer any trepidation over the security system.

The house had been expecting him.

Recessed lighting illuminated the space, which was more rustic than he’d imagined it would be. After so many years surrounded by cold, clean metal, the warm wood tones of the floor and the papered walls were a surprise. From the outside, he understood the need to blend, to be inconspicuous. But in here? That was unexpected.

The living room was large, with a fireplace built in the shape of an egg. As he approached, another small screen flickered to life, with a function to activate it. He left it untouched. The sectional was a deep, charcoal gray, dotted with blood red throw pillows. The coffee table itself was one big touch screen, which activated when he neared it, displaying dozens of controls for all manner of functions, both militaristic and domestic.

On the opposite wall from the fireplace was a staircase leading up, and a pair of doors standing at a ninety degree angle from each other. Opening one revealed a powder room; the mirror above the sink was another touchscreen.

The other was a bedroom, large enough to be the master, but with two full beds against the far wall, with a nightstand in between them. Like a hotel. Or where Lucy and Desi slept.

Separate but together.

He quickly backed out of that room.

The kitchen was immaculate, the most obviously modern quarter of the place. Beautiful stainless steel and marble gleaming proudly at him. An expensive Italian espresso machine sat beside the sink, copper glinting in the pre-dawn purple light through a window.

Look at me, it practically shouted at him.

He couldn't for more than a few seconds.

The attic was where he finally ended up, peering out one of the two windows that made up the eyes of the house. There was a daybed pushed up against the wall, headboard beneath the lip of the window. He shoved his small stash of belongings underneath.

The quilt was covered in a layer of dust that puffed out when he sat down. Maybe it was something he would have attacked before with an arsenal of microfiber cloths and lemon scented sprays and detergents.

Instead, he just laid down in it, and watched the morning creeping across the ceiling in a hazy pink. Dust motes danced around and the sticky gold light caught itself in spiderwebs.

Stone watched it all until it blurred. Not that it mattered. There wasn't anyone there to hear him cry when he did.

The Wachowski's were on the move two days later. Thomas (as he was called by his wife, Madeline) was escorted out in a wheelchair. Shadow watched from the roof of the hospital as Sonic and his friends hovered about him, helping him into a car. He followed at a distance to an airport, and was already waiting for them on the other side when the plane landed in Montana.

He was there when they reached their home, there when the lights were turned on and a dog was greeted. There when the lights went off, too.

He was intent on being there for as long as possible. It felt fair. Right. To watch over the family he had nearly torn apart with one stupid moment of rage. He found a tree that was at a distance where the humans wouldn't see him and the hedgehog and his friends wouldn't think to look.

As far as plans went, it was perfect.

For about a day.

Because trees, as it turned out, were really *really* uncomfortable.

And they also were not edible.

So. Onto Plan B.

The world kept turning , because that's all it could do. And once Stone had cried himself sore and achy, eyes dried out and itching, he did the only thing he could.

He got up and he began to try and find a space for himself in this new life.

It was harder than he would have liked.

The house was too quiet. When he did venture outside (carefully stepping around marked garden stones and tranq gun pink flamingos), he wound up on the trail behind the house until he made it to the highest point on the property. From there he could see the town of Green Hills below.

He wound up there at lunchtime.

He expected pitchforks and angry mobs. Maybe was even hoping for it, just for the distraction.

It wasn't exactly what he got.

"You look familiar," the owner of the diner told him when he picked himself up lunch.

He took the plastic bag. "I'm sure I don't."

The owner narrowed his eyes and then snapped his fingers. "You're the man that helped that Nick Robot fella , that right?"

"Uh-"

"Saw the broadcast on the news. Shame, even if he was a pill."

Another patron came up with her check and tilted her head, looking him over. She was an older woman with short, gray hair curled neatly around her head. "You're not after our aliens, are you? We're real protective of our aliens."

Stone swallowed, stomach a rock. "I'm retired," he offered weakly.

The woman's frown vanished. "Well then that's just fine," she chirped.

"Absolutely fine," the owner agreed. "Welcome to Green Hills. Have a cookie. On the house."

And just like that, the dream of being chased out of town was out.

One day passed. And then two. He sat on the swing outside alone, sat at the kitchen table alone, sat in the living room and was alone, alone, *alone* .

"Boys, can we *please* just make a decision. I'd like to actually get stuff done."

“It would get done if he’d just *let me do it* .”

“You will not win a fight for honor against a warrior, Hedgehog.”

Maddie, who looked seconds away from a headache, looked tiredly at her two eldest sons. There was a dishcloth over her shoulder and a final dish dripping in her hand. “Boys. It’s trash. One of you take it out before I get your little brother to do it, and then he can have all the honor or whatever. You’ve got homework to do.”

“But mom-”

“No buts!” She began drying the plate. “I know you’re trying to help out your dad, but all you’re doing is giving *me* a headache. So if you can’t decide who’s doing what, then I will.”

Knuckles glared at Sonic but finally released his hold of the garbage bag. “I suppose I can walk the dog.”

“ *Thank you* ,” said Maddie.

“Because I am very mature. More mature than any creature in this house.”

“Mom!”

“Sonic, you standing here isn’t going to help anyone. Scoot.”

He groaned something under his breath but did eventually shuffle past Knuckles, sticking a tongue out along the way. “I’d just like to add,” he shouted over his shoulder as he toed on his shoes and opened the back door, “that I am being *very helpful* and *very mature* by even volunteering to do chores, and I’d like that on the record!”

“Noted,” Maddie said back in a voice that somehow managed to roll its eyes. “Now stop letting in bugs, Mr. Mature.”

Sonic dragged the garbage over towards the side of the house, stopping to watch Knuckles zip from the back door and run circles around a bounding, happy Ozzy.

“We’re helping Dad,” he reminded himself, chanting it under his breath. It was silly and small, but he was excited to see his dad’s face when they gave him the rundown of everything they’d done.

As Knuckles and Ozzy headed for the street, Sonic hefted the trashbag around to the side of the house where the bins were. As he drew closer, he could hear rustling, the scrape of metal on metal. Raccoons again, probably. He’d let them have a scrap or two, and then shoo them away.

It was not raccoons.

One arm in the bin up to his shoulder, Shadow blinked saucer-wide eyes back at him.

A singular thought - *don't let him go!*- had Sonic dropping the back and shooting to the hedgehog's side. "OMG dude! Finally!" He caught him by the wrist. If he went to teleport, and they were touching, then he'd take Sonic with him. Maybe that'd be enough to keep him here. "We've been waiting for you to show up again!"

Shadow's eyes darted to the hand on his wrist. "...We?"

"Where've you been? How'd you survive that blast?? What're you doing digging in our- Oh. Oh crap. Oh, *dude* , no." He took a step away from the bins, tugging on Shadow's arm. "No. If you're hungry-"

"I'm not-" Shadow started to say, but the grumbling of his stomach corrected him.

"We've got *more* than enough food in the house. C'mon." Sonic tugged again, gloved fingers dragging on a rough patch of singed fur.

Shadow hissed, gritting his teeth.

"Sorrysorry!" Sonic loosened his grip but didn't let go. "It's ok! Mom can help with that!"

"...Mom?"

"Yeah! She's a vet."

Shadow mouthed the word *Vet* , brows drawn.

"Like- like a doctor, for animals! Don't be insulted, we're all animals here. Hey Mom! Mom!" he twisted to aim his shouts at the kitchen window and didn't have a chance to see the word Doctor burrow its way under Shadow's skin, eyes drawn wide and flicking between Sonic and the house. " *Mo-oooom!* "

The sash was drawn up and Maddie stuck her head out. "What're you shouting abou- Oh my god!"

"I found him, Mom!" Sonic beamed. "You were right, he's pretty banged up! Get the bacitracin, will ya?" He turned back to Shadow, who was looking more and more deer-in-the-headlights by the second. "It stings like hell, but only for a minute."

"I'll go grab my bag," Maddie said, then she ducked back inside. "Bring him to the bathroom, ok?"

"Will do! Oh, dude - we gotta get you a bath."

Shadow watched where Maddie had ducked away. His hands were shivering. He barely caught the other words, swallowing before he repeated them back. "A… bath?"

"Never had one? I hadn't either, but they're ah- *may*- zing, trust me. You're gonna feel like a whole new hedgehog."

But Shadow's feet seemed glued to the driveway. "I- You- Mom? Bath?" His face pinched. "*Doctor* ."

"You can just call her Maddie. Or Mrs. Wachowski, even though that sounds weird, I think, but my friends call her that when they're over, so. She doesn't like Pretzel Lady that much, though, so don't call her that." Sonic gave him another tug. "Dude, c'mon!"

Shadow stared at the open door. "You want me. Inside."

"That's where the bath is, yeah. And then we'll get you something to eat. We had spaghetti for dinner. Do you like spaghetti? Do you even *know* what spaghetti is? Whatever, we'll show you. It's like worms but better and less alive." He tugged again. Shadow dug his heels in harder.

"No."

"I mean, we've got other stuff to eat, too? I can make you a sandwich. Do you like turkey-"

" *No* ." Shadow tried to pull his arm back, hissing at the burn but pulling harder regardless. "I can't go inside."

"Hey, it's okay, really!"

"It's not." He planted his feet more firmly. "I can't- I *won't* - I don't belo-"

"More Formidable Hedgehog! You have returned! Most excellent!"

Knuckles had let Ozzy off the leash and the retriever was circling them, tail wagging and barking excitedly.

Ozzy was on Sonic first with a wet nose to the face before bounding towards Shadow. Shadow pulled back, wide eyed, jerking Sonic towards him as he fell backwards.

"No! It's okay!" Sonic tried to push Ozzy back. "He's friendly! See! He's *nice!"*

Shadow wasn't listening anymore. Ears pinned and chest heaving, his gaze flickered between the dog, the two aliens in front of him, and the front door. It all tipped when Maddie popped her head out and saw the source of the commotion, hurrying down the steps to help. "Are you boys alright? Knuckles, grab Ozzy! Sonic, get your friend in here-"

The chaos had been little more than a blip for the Wachowski home, but it was enough for Shadow to startle-

-and then get pushed over the edge when Maddie rushed down the steps, stethoscope in one hand, bag in the other. His eyes met Maddie's.

"Hey," her voice lowered and she reached out. The stethoscope dangled from her fingers. "It's alright-"

And that was enough.

He pulled back his arm in one sharp *tug* , not caring about burns or raw scrapes. Sonic felt his grip slipping and held tighter, but all he managed to do was get his fingers around the gold band on Shadow's arm. He felt it slide away faster than even he could catch, and before he had enough time to reach out with his other hand there was a flash.

When they opened their eyes again, blinking out the spots from the burst of light, Shadow was gone.

In his place was a tipped over trash can and one very happy dog.

"Are you *kidding* me!" Sonic scrubbed his face. "I had him!"

"Poor kid. He looked pretty rough." Maddie sighed, leaning down to squeeze Sonic's shoulder. "You did your best, honey."

"I could've done better if *Ozzy* hadn't parkoured all over him!" He turned around to glare at Knuckles. "Why'd you let him off the leash!"

"Because that is customary at the end of his walkies," Knuckles said. "Besides, all hope is not lost, brother. Behold-" He gestured at Sonic's right hand. "You have retained his shiny bauble."

"His what?" Sonic looked down at his fist, closed around the ring.

"His bauble," said Knuckles, gesturing again. "His. Token. His… I do not know. But it seems like something he would not want to lose."

"Huh." Sonic looked down, turning it over in his hand. "Yeah. I guess."

"He will need to come back for it." Knuckles puffed out his chest. "It is like that movie we watched. Do you remember, Mother? The irresponsible Dirt Girl who could not keep track of her footwear!"

"Cinderella, sweetheart."

"Exactly! *He* is the Dirt Girl called Cinder Ella. And he has lost his footwear. And now we will hold it captive, like the young man did when he hunted her down like an animal."

Maddie pinched the bridge of her nose. "I think it was supposed to be romantic…" She blew out a breath and looked down at Sonic's hand. "But he has a point. He'll need to come back for that if it's important."

"But-" Sonic bit down on his lip. "What if he doesn't. Or what if he keeps coming by to dig in the trash. Mom, he was digging in the *trash* ." He swallowed. "I used to do that here, remember? And it- it *sucked* ."

Maddie kneeled down and gathered him close, as if she couldn't do anything but hold him. "Yeah," she muttered. "I know. So let's figure that out, and we can give this to your brother. Maybe Tails can make some sense out of it. Okay?"

“Okay…”

“Good.” She pressed a kiss to his forehead, took the ring, and stood back up. “But first, I think you have some things to clean up.”

Sonic glanced back towards the trash cans. Two of them had toppled over, and Ozzy (thankfully wrangled back by Knuckles) had torn apart the bags. “Are you *kidding* me! I just poured out my *heart* to you, Mother! My heart and soul! Bared and out on the ground! And you’re just gonna *stomp* on them like that?”

“Just remember to throw it out so it doesn’t stay on the floor,” she called, climbing up the steps. “And lock the lids when you’re done!”

“This is child labor!”

“Love you too, honey.”

“Have fun, Dirt Girl!” Knuckles cackled, following Ozzy up the steps. “I hope you locate your footwear!”

He closed the door just before a banana peel could nail him in the face.

It only took three days for Stone to hate the house. And four to decide he wanted nothing to do with it.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the ceiling on the fourth night. “I know you made it for me, but I can’t be here alone.”

The house said nothing back.

Four days. That’s all it took for him to storm up into the attic and begin dumping what few belongings he’d brought along back into his duffel bag, the pieces of his broken heart scattered in the cobwebs and cabinets, waiting to be left behind.

“I tried,” he said, folding a shirt as neatly as he could before giving up and stuffing it beneath his laptop. “I really, really tried to stay, alright? And I know you’d give me hell for giving up, but I don’t care. So unless you want to say something about it, I’m *going* .”

The house said nothing.

He rubbed his eyes hard enough to see spots. “That’s what I thought.” He shoved a pair of pants and a sweatshirt in, trying not to scream when the zipper stuck closing the damn thing. “For once in your stupid life,” he snarled, tugging at the zipper hard enough to snap, “why can’t you just. Let. Me. *Leave!”*

And then the alarms went off.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Stone gets an unexpected and unintended visitor.

Shadow couldn’t-wouldn’t-didn’t go back to the tree.

Instead, he did what he’d always done when he felt overwhelmed.

He ran.

He ran up and over the mountains, then through a desert, a lush forest, along a great chasm, all of it an unnoticed blur to his burning eyes.

Not running *to*.

He’d never run *to*.

Only ever run *from*.

Which was what he was doing now, though what exactly he was running from, he couldn’t say.

He’d wanted to stay close enough to keep an eye on the family, but he’d toed over a line that had gotten him caught twice. So he would have to rethink his strategy.

All he needed was a good night's sleep and something in his stomach, and he’d be able to think of a plan in the morning. Picturing the treetops at the mountain’s summit, Shadow closed his eyes and-

The *zap* that ran through him was painfully unexpected, and he was tossed to the ground somewhere between where he’d been standing and where he’d wanted to go. He sat up with a hiss and clutched at his chest, trying to catch his breath.

His paws were shaking, and it took him two tries to wrap them around himself, hugging tight to tamp down the feeling of currents under his skin.

A second try was no better and he was tumbling across pine needles with a weak cry, landing on his back and staying there, panting up towards a starry sky.

It took him a minute to realize what had gone wrong.

His ring.

One awful, stupid ring was missing from around his left wrist.

He groaned and let his arm fall back to the dirt.

Of course. Of *course*. The hedgehog must have gotten it when he'd grabbed Shadow's arm. "Perfect," he grumbled, wincing as he finally managed to pull himself up into a sitting position.

So until he got his powers under control, teleporting was out. He didn't know what a third try would do to him, not when the fur on his arms was still standing from the excess electricity, and his legs wobbled when he tried to stand. He caught himself on a tree and waited until his knees didn't buckle before taking a few tentative steps forward.

A place to recuperate. That's all he needed. Just a few days and he'd be able to get his ring back and get on with his life. Whatever that *life* looked like.

Watching and protecting the stupid, loud, scary family, probably. Not that he had anything else to do. His existence had looked a lot like locked cages and glass walls. He'd hoped that being out would be different, but so far it was turning out all the same. Just trading one type of trapped existence to another. There wasn't anything waiting for him beyond the trees. He may as well make an existence, even if it was from afar and alone.

Shaking out his legs, he continued his slow walk forward, limping around boulders and tree roots. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. But he figured he'd know it when it appeared.

And it did appear, eventually. In the shape of a little, dark cabin in a clearing.

From the thin layers of dirt on the pathway and the dust coated windows, it hadn't been lived in for a long time. The empty building was as good as a lighthouse in a storm and he hobbled towards it, careful not to trample any of the little flowers and herbs growing from the cracks in the dirt.

As he approached what he imagined was the back porch, he hoped that the door wasn't locked. He could break the glass, but he wasn't looking forward to picking the shards out of his elbow.

He was bracing himself for the task as he put his foot down on the first step, which turned out to have been a good move, because the bolas that shot out from under a hatch in the floorboards didn't sting quite as much as it could have as it wrapped around his legs, knocking him backwards onto the ground.

With a grunt, he started to push himself up, only to be hit with another, smack in the sternum, the ropes cinching his arms tight to his sides. His cheek hit the dirt first and he tasted iron. "D'mmit," he muttered, spitting blood on the clover. He squirmed against the binds, but they held fast.

Just as he was debating a third attempt at teleportation, the sound of gears whirring drew his attention and he twisted.

Emerging from the porch ceiling was a long, jointed, metal arm with a clamp at one end. The clamp opened, and moved in his direction.

“Nonononononononono *hellno!* ” He squirmed again, his body only inching away and not nearly fast enough. The clamp closed hard around his ankles and he was hoisted into the air, blood rushing to his head even as he flailed. “No! Damn it, no!” The back door opened. The metal arm began to retract. “No *please no!*”

Not that the machine cared.

No one ever much had, anyway. Well. Almost no one.

Squirming and pleading did nothing, but he couldn’t stop himself from trying. He wriggled and puffed out *please* s and *no* s breathlessly, only trying that much harder when the arm dragged him into the dark. It did finally let go, but only to drop him down onto a hard floor. He fell with a sharp yelp, shoulder banging hard, tumbling onto his side. Something in front of him dropped with a sound of metal on metal and shook the room around him. There was enough light from the open door they’d come from to see bars on all sides and a lid being slammed down heavily. Above, the arm retracted with a mechanic *whrr*.

“Wait! *Wait!”* He stumbled onto his knees, falling forward, arms and legs still bound tight. “Hey!”

The arm only continued its journey out where it had come from. And then the door closed, leaving him completely in the dark while all around him, an alarm blared.

“So he’s *alive?”*

“He’s alive.” Maddie lifted Tom’s leg, settling a pillow more carefully under his shin. She’d showered and the room was just losing its steam from the hot water she’d used in the ensuite.

It had taken an hour to pick garbage out of Sonic and Ozzy’s fur and get the both of them in their own bath and shower respectively. Sonic had apparently wrestled their dog away twice after Ozzy managed to sneak past Knuckles to try and get a second dinner out of whatever he could find in the mystical black bagged buffet.

“I mean. I knew he was alive. You told me he was alive. But he’s *alive* , and he’s *here.”*

She nodded and blew out a breath before carefully crawling over his leg to her side of the bed, leaning against the headboard. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m *glad* he stuck around. The poor kid, Tom. You should’ve seen him. He was so banged up. The moment he saw me though?” She snapped her fingers morosely. “Gone.”

“Well, from my experience, he doesn’t have much reason to trust grownups.”

“Yeah…” Maddie leaned against his side and dropped her head to his shoulder, being careful with how much weight she rested against her ‘Handle With Care’ husband. “He was digging

through the trash."

"Poor kid."

"Sonic used to do that, too."

Tom laced their fingers together. "I know. He showed me where he used to sleep in our garage."

They were quiet a moment, lying there together. Above them they could hear Sonic and Tails chatting away, Knuckles' heavy footsteps pacing back and forth while he did his best to keep up with his siblings' conversation.

Careful of his stiff muscles, Tom turned to drop a kiss to his wife's head. "He's with us now. They all are."

"I just don't like thinking about Shadow out there alone."

"I don't either. But we know better now, right? We can nip this thing in the bud faster."

"I hope so."

Tom hummed. "Didn't you say he left something behind?"

"Mhm. Tails is looking at it now."

"And we're sure that's… safe?"

"Honey, it was either we gave it to him or we hid it and let him pick all the locks in the house to find it on his own."

"Shit, you're right." He tipped his head to rest on hers. "We need to actually catch him in the act more often. God, that kid abuses his cuteness."

"It's downright nuclear." She laughed and squeezed his hand, careful of the splint around his pointer finger. "I think in the meantime though we need to figure out how to take care of this new kid, even if he won't let us."

"I mean…" his gaze drifted up towards the ceiling, eyes sad. "We didn't even know we had a playbook before, but maybe it's time we use some moves from it?"

"What's that mean?"

"Remember what Sonic told us he used to do? Stealing blankets and clothes that we were going to donate and left on the front porch. Taking food we'd left outside. I mean, it let us catch him eventually. He got stuck in the garage and I got him with a tranq. Which he likes to remind me of *way* too often, by the way, so there's that."

Maddie scrubbed her face before dropping her forehead against the steeple of her knees, exhausted. "Yeah, but Sonic stayed in our garage, Tom, so he was already letting his guard

down. Something tells me that this one isn't going to fall for a trap as easily as our little guy did, even if we didn't know we were setting it up. Sonic thinks he's sticking around because he feels bad for what he did to you."

"It wasn't his fault."

She peeked at him from where her eyes were still hiding against her kneecaps. "Thomas, it took our kids weeks of therapy to even admit they had trauma. Unless there's a squirrel licensed in psychiatry hiding in a pine tree out there, I don't think this new kid is going to get that."

Thomas snorted. He lifted their linked hands and kissed the back of Maddie's. "And we'll figure that out, too, alright? For right now, how about we just make sure we tick off what boxes we can. Food. Blankets. And then we can figure out next steps."

Maddie smiled tiredly at him and finally lifted her head again. "Little steps."

"Little steps," he agreed.

From upstairs there was a crash.

"Just let me have a turn with the blowtorch!"

"No!"

Maddie's face fell back against her knees with a groan.

"Oof." Tom clucked his tongue. "Sorry, babe. I'd love to help, but. Yunno." He motioned to his entire body. "I'm frail and weak."

"I cannot *wait* until they take the casts off. Then you can pick garbage out of your son and dog's fur for an hour."

"Man, I'm missing out. That sounds like a party to me."

" *Sonic, give that back!"*

"Not until you let me help with the- ow! *Knuckles, get off!"*

"It is my turn to use the stick of fire, brother!"

"You're both going to- Knuckles, you burnt my sheets!"

"It is just a smudge, do not be so dramatic."

"You're breaking up fights on your own for a *month*," Maddie hissed, stomping off the bed.

"Ooh. I love it when you order me around."

"A whole month, Thomas."

There was another crash and Maddie was spinning on her heel heading towards the attic stairs. “The three of you better be in bed when I get up there!”

There was a mad scramble and whispers above Thomas’ head.

“And I swear, if I find a fire anywhere in that room, I don’t even *care* if I end up covered in spaghetti, the three of you are on garbage duty until *Christmas.”*

The scramble above Tom’s head became ever more desperate. Somewhere, something was being furiously swatted out. He snorted and leaned back against his pillows. As much as he missed being up and about with his kids, there really was at least some joy in watching the show from the bleachers.

Despite being in a house built like a fortress, there were surprisingly few weapons in arms reach, which meant that Stone was creeping through the pulsing red lights of an alarm down the dark staircase of the house carrying a charming hand-carved lamp out like a sword.

He poked his head down and peeked through the banisters, before toeing slowly onto the first floor.

The kitchen was empty. And the front door, somehow, was still locked. He’d nearly put the lamp down and chalked it up to old wiring when the flash of the red, blinking light gleamed against something metal in the living room.

Stone had spent the past few days in a sad, lonely haze. But he hadn’t been so sad and so lonely that he would have missed the cage sitting in front of his new sectional.

Lamp held over one shoulder like a baseball bat, he eased his way around the bulky piece of furniture, ready for anything. Bear, cougar, drifter, he was ready.

One step more and he finally got a good look.

A black and red hedgehog, hogtied and squirming.

He blinked hard. Nope, not seeing things. There was definitely a hedgehog ina cage in front of the coffee table. He couldn’t think straight, the alarm still screaming, the red lights still strobing. He needed quiet. “A-Alarm! Off!” he shouted.

It screamed at him still.

“God damn it, house, would you *shut up?*”

The house fell silent.

Well, silent save for the stifled whimpers of the hedgehog in the cage.

“Oh shit.” No tricks. No play of the lights, which had ceased flashing and reset to a dim, steady, warm white. “Shit. ShitshitshitshitshitShadow! Shadow, oh my god!” The lamp

clattered to the floor as he hurried to crouch beside the crate, frantically searching for the mechanism that would open it. “Hold on, alright? I’ll get you out of there.”

There was a sniffle, a shaky inhale and then, “Figured you were dead.”

Stone breathed out a weak laugh. “Ditto. Gimme a minute, ok?” He gave up groping at the cage and moved to the coffee table. The touchscreen was lit up bright red, displaying security controls he hadn’t seen before. “Seriously? Why wasn’t there a manual with this place, huh?” He pressed a big, stupid, obvious button with a mustache detailing and at once the cage disassembled and sank back into the floor.

Stone crawled back over to the hedgehog and reached for the ropes.

Shadow flinched, cringing away.

“Whoa, whoa, easy. I’m just gonna get these off, ok?”

Shadow watched him carefully. His eyes were swimming. “*Just* that.”

“Just that.”

Stone waited until he got a nod before he was tugging at the ropes trying to find the weakest points.

“I wasn’t crying, by the way,” Shadow sniffled.

“Totally,” said Stone, pulling at a knot and frowning.

“I’m *not* crying now, either,” Shadow added, breath hitching.

“Course you’re not,” said Stone, who was polite enough not to point out the tears wobbling around Shadow’s lashes. “It would be fine if you were, though. It seems like you’ve had a rough day.”

“I’m *fine*.”

“Alright,” said Stone, finally getting one of the knots undone. “Whatever you say, alright?” He tugged at another knot and sighed. “Would you be okay if I got scissors?” Shadow gave him a long, wobbly look and Stone sighed. “Fine. Hard way it is.”

It took ten minutes, but Shadow’s arms were eventually free. Stone had to jump away when the hedgehog’s hands crackled with electricity. Shadow watched him, hands outstretched and sparking until he felt like Stone got the message. Then he shuffled himself backwards to try and untangle his own legs.

“I can do it,” Shadow hissed, clearing his throat when the words cracked. “So you can go now.”

“I really don’t think I can.”

There was another snap of electricity from the boy, weaker the second time around. Stone moved backwards but only as far as to the couch, stubbornly sitting himself between two red pillows. Even so, he held himself stiffly, eyes never leaving the ribbons of red sparks. He'd spent years around dangerous machines and creatures and people, and there was only so much one could let their guard down.

"I could destroy you, you know that," said Shadow. His voice shook. "I *could*. So you should probably just leave."

Stone looked over the hedgehog, taking in the scrapes and cuts and swelling ankle. There were patches of fur missing by his ears where the skin was red and burnt.

He swallowed and reached out. "I think I should probably-"

Another bigger *zap* and Stone had to leap over the back of the couch, ducking before he could get hit. There was an awful sizzle and the smell of ash, and when he turned around he saw a dark streak across the doorway to the kitchen.

"That's *oak*." He said, popping his head up from where he was crouched behind the couch, because he couldn't think of anything else to say while his nerves remembered how to settle. "Do you even realize how expensive oak is?"

Shadow bared his teeth.

"Fine!" Stone threw his hands up. "Stay there, for all I care! I was getting ready to leave anyway!"

And he got up and stormed back upstairs, leaving the hedgehog behind him.

He was almost hoping that when he got back, Shadow would be gone. It would have been simpler. Sure, the guilt would nag him, and the worry might sit too heavy on his shoulders, but Stone was used to that. He could find a way to live with it.

And it wasn't like the kid looked happy to see him. He'd looked about ready to burn Stone's head off. And with how the hedgehog had been hauled around by adults for fifty-odd years, he couldn't much blame him.

There wasn't a being more equipped to survive the elements than a superpowered alien with a penchant for revenge. Besides, he was fueled with the energy of chaos itself. Surely he could untie a rope.

When he did make his way back down, duffel slung over his shoulder, he was instead greeted by a very weepy looking hedgehog still fighting with said rope. And from the looks of it, the rope was winning.

Stone stood at the foot of the stairs, watching for a long, truthfully painful moment. "...You good?"

"*Yes!*" The word was raw and wet and hit three different octaves in a single syllable. In the light of glowing red eyes, wet streaks shone clearly down his cheeks.

He could have left then. He looked towards the door, shouldering his bag and shifting foot to foot. He could walk out the door, get into a car, and never look back.

He wasn't sure what gave him pause. Or maybe he did. But it sat heavy in his chest and pinned him to his spot on the floor, glancing between the door and the sniffling, twisted up hedgehog. He looked back at the door. The hedgehog. The door again.

He let out a long breath.

In the end, there wasn't even much of a choice.

Stone let the duffel bag hit the floor. "Cool." Then he promptly marched to the kitchen and returned with a bowl of mini pretzels. He sat himself purposefully on the opposite side of the sofa, and said. "House? Is there a remote? How do we get the TV up and running?"

The TV blinked to life. *Las Cargas del Deseo* flashed across the screen.

Shadow paused in his battle with the knots around his legs, flinching at the sudden burst of noise and light. "Wha-?"

"S'my house. Got the deed and everything. And it's TV time." He tilted the bowl in the boy's direction. "You wanna get in on this?"

With a growl, Shadow went back to picking at the rope.

"Suit yourself."

Stone did his best to keep his eyes on the screen. He watched a woman in a nurses uniform slap a doctor across the face before dragging him into a passionate kiss. Watched as a door opened from behind in what must have been the worst, least guarded hospital of all time as the doctor's twin jumped into view.

"I knew it," said Stone, more to himself than anyone else, and peeked out of the corner of his eye to watch Shadow pull uselessly at the rope some more. The kid hissed when one of the knots went tighter and dug into already bruised, burnt skin. His paws shook and reached up to quickly swipe at his eyes.

Stone looked away when Shadow's gaze flickered towards him.

At one point during a commercial break he heard Shadow sniffle and stifle a frustrated sob. And then another noise. A hollow grumble. The child stopped his fruitless war against the ropes for a moment and curled into himself, hunched over his legs.

Stone let the commercials continue to play, thinking. He looked down at his phone and searched through his documents, scrolling until he found something that seemed doable.

When he stood up, Shadow sat to attention and held out his sparking hands, but Stone was ready this time around and didn't so much as flinch. "Relax," he said, walking around the couch, back to Shadow. "I'll be in the kitchen. Holler if you need me."

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which knots are battled with and food is prepared.

He was pathetic. The ‘ultimate lifeform’ and he couldn’t even get himself free. Chaos energy vibrated through his arms, but it was useless, only serving to make his muscles tired and more sore than ever. And with one ring missing, he couldn’t control it well enough to tamp it down, give his body a break. So it just kept pulsing, revving up with each surge of frustration.

If he could just calm down, it would recede to a simmer, but how could he calm down when every tug on his bindings only made them cinch tighter? His calves were stinging, going numb, meaning that even if he *did* ever manage to get free, his legs would be asleep, and he couldn’t run. And that wasn’t even factoring in the way his right ankle was swelling.

He dropped his hands to his sides, leaning back against the sofa, trying to get control of his breathing.

But that was no good either. His chest heaved as each breath hitched with another blow to his decimated dignity. The tears kept steadily rolling down his face, just one more thing he was powerless to fight.

‘Stiff upper lip, my boy,’ Gerald had chided him, decades ago, when a series of tests had been too much. *‘You’re the most powerful being in the universe. What do* you *have to cry about? Waste of energy anyway. We’ve got too much work to do for that sort of nonsense.’*

The old man’s voice in his head only made the tears flow faster.

Because really, what did it matter anyway? The old man was as good as dust and now *he* was stuck in a house, hungry, cold, tired, and hurt, with his ego burned somewhere far behind him. So little good Gerald’s advice had done anyone.

He folded over onto his legs again, clutching at the stupid, awful, godforsaken ropes and shut his eyes.

On the TV, people were lamenting in Spanish.

In the kitchen, there were other sounds.

And smells.

Savory, hearty smells.

His stomach clenched painfully, reminding him how very empty it was.

There was clanking in the kitchen and the sound of a radio turned on and clashed with the swell of romantic music on the television. It switched off once the episode had ended, the new one already starting up. The burnt door opened and Stone came out again, bowls in one hand, a pot in the other, held by its handle. He dropped back onto the sofa and set everything down, spooning something into one of the bowls.

Then he kicked his feet up onto the coffee table and dug in.

"Mmm." Stone pointed towards the pot with his spoon. "I made too much, if you want some."

Shadow swallowed.

Stone shrugged and ate some more. "Might even take a shower after this. Grab a nap. Might as well enjoy this new house of mine." He finished the bowl and filled up a second. "It's Mujadara. My mom's recipe. It's good."

Shadow swallowed again, mouth watering against his will. "I… can't," he forced the words out. "I'm busy." He gestured at his legs.

"Mm. Yeah that is a conundrum." Stone set his bowl down. "Too bad there's nobody else here with free hands who could help with that."

Shadow grit his teeth.

His stomach clenched again, hard.

"Rrrrrrrrr*fine*," he growled. "Have it your way."

And then, before he could second guess the decision, a bowl filled with warm rice and lentils was being placed in his hands, and he stuck his muzzle in it without a thought.

"Cool yeah, who needs a spoon?" Stone returned to the floor and Shadow was vaguely aware of hands on his legs, but he barely felt them. Mouthful after mouthful he swallowed, hardly stopping to appreciate the taste. Rice stuck to his fur, fell to the floor, until the bowl was empty and he swiveled, stretching to grab the other bowl. And the pot too. "Yup, sure, help yourself."

He did.

When all three dishes were empty he finally stopped to think again. He dragged his thumb across his muzzle, sweeping leftover lentils into his mouth.

He stared into the empty pot.

He sniffled.

Fat tears rolled down his face and mixed with the squished lentils stuck in his fur. “Is there more?” he warbled.

“How about we worry about your legs first, and then we can talk about more food.”

Shadow scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his wrist. “Yeah. Okay.”

Stone had to resort to scissors at the end, sawing through the remaining rope. Shadow had seemingly given up most of the fight he’d had in him earlier on and let Stone help him onto the couch.

“We’re out of lentils, so I’ll need to go to the store,” Stone called from the kitchen. “But I’ve got more pretzels, and some chips, I think. I’d like something healthier around but that’ll have to wait until-”

He stepped out of the kitchen, bag of pretzels in hand, to find Shadow already conked out on the couch. The kid was still covered in smushed lentils and bits of rice were stuck to his whiskers. But he was snoring soundly, and Stone didn’t want to chance getting shocked by shaking the hedgehog awake.

“Alright,” Stone muttered to the ceiling. “You win this time. *Again*. But I’m doing this my way. You got that?”

The house said nothing.

He looked towards the door, duffel bag still sitting in the front.

“But I’m not unpacking,” he told the house. “Just so we’re clear.”

In the center of the living room, the top of the coffee table lifted on hinges, revealing a pile of throw blankets neatly folded.

Stone sighed, and grabbed one to lay over top of the teenage alien on the couch.

Shadow was surrounded by softness. Soft cushions beneath him, soft blanket tucked to his ears. For a long, hazy moment, he imagined he’d see Christmas lights and draping pink sheets when he opened his eyes. He kept them closed, let himself imagine.

There was birdsong somewhere not far away. A static pattering of rain. And nearer by, even breathing.

He forced his itchy, tired eyes open, blinking away the crust of dried tears. His gaze flitted around the room. The TV was dark, stripes of early morning light cutting across the screen. The mess of tangled ropes were gone from the floor, as were the bowls and pot. On the opposite end of the sectional, with feet up on the coffee table and a too-small blanket atop him, was the man called Stone. Sleeping still, head tipped to one side against the pillows.

He could go.

Surely the little cabin's defenses wouldn't object to him *leaving* the premises.

So he could go.

Just, get up.

Off the soft sofa.

Out from under the warm blanket.

Hobble his way out the door and…

…and what?

Go out into the rain and limp through the trees? Hide in a shrub, hungry and cold and *not* full of lentils and Spanish dramas?

Not having a good answer, he pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders, shut his eyes, and tried to go back to Christmas lights and pink sheets.

He awoke again to the sound of clicking and hushed voices. He thought it might have been the end of a record, and opened his eyes to move the needle and turn it off. Instead he was met with the sight of Stone on the couch typing away at a computer.

Stone paused his typing to grin Shadow's way. "Morning, sleepy head."

Shadow glared.

"Alright, no fun names, got it." Stone shrugged and went back to typing. The TV was on with the volume low. A man with a horrifically white smile was advertising the miracle of mouthwash.

Shadow sat up slowly. His muscles pulled and his skin stung. He paused between each little movement, hissing and baring his teeth until he'd finally sat up enough to lean against an armrest and wrap the blanket around himself. "What are you looking at?"

"Researching the town. I did recon before but never of the businesses. Did you know Green Hills has *two* award winning bakeries. Speaking of-" He reached to his left beyond Shadow's line of sight and lifted a brown paper bag into view. "Turns out that if you pay enough money people will deliver anywhere."

Shadow stared at the bag until Stone gave it a shake. "It won't bite," said Stone. "So either you take it or I will."

Shadow did finally take it, carefully peeking into the bag and reaching in his hand. He half expected a machine to dart out and grab him.

Instead he was rewarded with a muffin.

“It’s chocolate,” said Stone, eyes still on his computer. “I ate the blueberry one, but I got scones too if you want that.”

Shadow stared down at the baked good.

Stone’s fingers paused on the keys. He glanced over. “You can actually eat this one with your hands.” He said, and though his face was serious, there was a smile somewhere in his voice. “Just saying.”

To his credit, Shadow made breakfast less of a performance than dinner had been and actually remembered to breathe between bites. He still kept his distance from Stone but didn’t burst into electricity every time the man rearranged his crossed legs on the coffee table or got up to refill his coffee, so Stone counted it as a win.

“What else are you looking at,” Shadow asked quietly, halfway through the muffin. “Besides bakeries.”

“Right now? Doctors.”

Shadow froze. “Doctors?”

“Mm. Well. I don’t know if *doctor* is the right word for this. But want to hear something crazy?” Stone twisted the computer Shadow’s way. “I didn’t actually know their jobs, since we were after the aliens staying in their home, but it turns out that *Madeline Wachowski* is actually one of the vets here. I thought since we know her. Sort of. We could pay a visit. I don’t think she’ll hate me too much. Or at least she won’t try to punch me at her office. That’s not professional. At least I don’t think it is? I haven’t had an HR department in a while. So beats me. Anyway, I don’t think going to her house is the best plan, but I can make an appointment right from the website. Or. Maybe I should just take a chance and call. Not sure if there’s a form to submit for this kind of a- hey. Hey, what’s wrong?”

While Stone was talking, Shadow had begun to slowly back himself into a tighter and tighter spot on the couch, hunched over himself and staring at Stone.

“Shadow?”

“You’re not handing me over to them.”

“Handing you over to- what are you talking about?”

“You think I don’t know what grown humans do with something like me?” Shadow was sparking around the frays. His hands shook and he flinched through each current, but it didn't seem like he had the control to stop it. It didn’t seem like he had control of anything.

Especially not when he stood, leaning against the back of the couch for support. He took a step back, but his knees couldn’t support the weight and he toppled backwards with a yelp.

Stone leapt forward, arm shooting out to grab him. Keep him from falling over the armrest and onto the hardwood below.

It happened in moments. Seconds. Less than that. Shadow saw Stone reaching even as he was midfall. Stone saw Shadow's eyes widen, saw the panic and fear multiply.

And then in a snap of air, Stone was alone.

He fell forward, reaching into nothing. His chest hit the armrest and the air in his lungs was pushed out in a solid *oomph* . He groaned, rubbing at a bruise that would no doubt be purple by evening.

He took his time sitting up. Hand dragging against the back of the couch, he felt something run beneath his hand and clump between his fingers. Raising the hand up towards the light from the front windows, he was met with bits of black fur all stuck together down his hand in sticky, red streaks. Where Shadow had fallen on the couch was speckled and smeared with it. The blanket he'd dropped when he stood was splotched as well.

"Well, fuck," said Stone.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> Let's all not give the person taking office on TV the attention he so pathetically craves and read a little Sonic together, shall we?

Shadow collided with the ground with so much force he saw stars. Dirt and grass flew up all around him, raining down on him in a hail of sticks and stones. Dust filled his mouth, his eyes, and he rolled to one side, gagging and spitting. He tried to draw a deep breath and more dirt went down his throat, and he doubled over, heaving until his airway was clear.

He lay on the ground, raggedly breathing, muddy saliva running down his chin and onto his clenched fists.

He didn't know how long he laid there, forehead to the ground, trying to summon up enough strength to stand.

His whole body felt like it was on fire, muscles screaming at him. The wild chaos energy that had launched him wherever the hell he was now still pulsed inside him, making every nerve sting.

He hadn't meant to do that.

He'd *known* teleporting uninhibited was a risk. And a painful one.

But he hadn't been thinking clearly. Stone had said 'doctors' and he'd seen red, acted on instinct.

And now he was even worse off than before.

Stupid. So, incredibly, *predictably* stupid.

With a grunt, he pushed himself up to hands and knees.

His shadow was directly beneath him. Midday.

He'd been lying here for hours.

Pathetic. Stupid.

He eased himself into a sitting position, groaning as his ankle protested mightily. With some effort, he scooted back into the shade of a tree, braced himself, and then tried to take off his shoe.

"*Motherfffffff!* " He bit his tongue and let go, panting hard.

Pathetic. Stupid. Weak.

He took a deep breath. Another. Laying back he patted the ground around him until he found a stick that fit in his palm. Stuck it between his teeth and bit down. Then he hunched forward and yanked the air shoe off. The stick broke in two and he spat the splinters away.

The sock came off easier, and he finally got a good look at the damage. No wonder the shoe had been stuck so fast, with how badly his ankle was swollen. Cringing, he prodded it with a forefinger and instantly regretted it. White hot pain shot up his leg.

He'd never broken a bone before. Up until this moment he hadn't even considered it to be a possibility. Invulnerable, they'd called him. Apparently, invulnerability had its limits.

And he figured the missing ring around his wrist didn't help.

He stretched his leg out gingerly in front of him, scanning the ground for another stick. When none readily appeared within arms' reach, he instead tore a hunk of bark from the tree. It took some doing, and some tearing his sock into strips, but he managed to fashion a rudimentary splint.

"Alright," he mumbled, pulling himself up painfully against the tree. "Next steps. You remember the next step."

He'd never gone camping. In the past few days, he'd gotten to experience something at least parallel to it, he assumed. If camping was sleeping outside, then he could check that off the list.

Maria had always wanted to go camping. She'd had nature books on her shelves that she'd read to Shadow. They were survival guides mostly from troops she'd never belonged to. They outlined things like starting a fire and what leaves were bad to touch and which were okay.

None of the knowledge had been useful back then, but he hadn't cared. It had been nice sharing a dream with her. One of many that they'd talk about inside of a blanket fort in her room, surrounded by twinkle lights and the static of a six inch television.

He could still hear Maria's voice clearly rounding out each word. *It's imperative that a good scout find themselves shelter and a clean source of water* .

Shelter. He needed shelter and a source of water. That's what Maria would have told him to do. So that's what he would do.

Eyeing another tree close by he hobbled slowly towards it, gripping it to steady himself. He did the same with the next. And the next. It was slow. Slower than he'd ever gone. But he needed to be careful.

If you're ever hurt, keeping the affected limb steady and straight is crucial. A bone that heals incorrectly can be more trouble than the cursory break.

He didn't know if his ankle was broken, but he knew it hurt like hell, and that his chances of getting out of the situation he'd hurled himself into would be that much better if he didn't screw himself over with shoddy first aid.

Not that he didn't deserve it. For what he'd done to the man named Thomas, he probably deserved much worse.

He dragged in a deep breath and steadied himself. Shelter. Water. A better splint. That's what he needed, and then he could go back to his job, protecting those that he hurt with his cowardice and hate. That's all that mattered in the end.

Taking another fortifying break he continued his slow, painful trek from tree to tree.

Stone had to hold himself back from racing down the mountain after a creature he couldn't see. He had one arm in his jacket before he realized the pointlessness and tossed the jacket somewhere towards the door. There was a *whrr*; a mechanical arm, probably, picking it up.

"Shit," he hissed under his breath, pacing across the living room. "Shitshitfucking *shit*."

How was he supposed to know that the kid had a trigger? To be fair, the kid probably had boatloads of reasons for them, but it wasn't like he'd known.

He paced back across the living room and caught sight of the couch. It made him nauseous. The streaks and specks of blood and fur across the cushions. Shadow needed help. *Actual* help that Stone couldn't provide. Sure, he could offer a roof and goat milk lattes and Spanish soaps. But they needed a doctor. An actual, honest to goodness, not-so-evil, licensed medical professional.

If he'd just gotten to the kid faster-

"He popped like a balloon to *nowhere*," he muttered under his breath, raking hands through his hair. "Not like you could've caught him, Stone…"

Then again, *he* might not have had the power to catch a superpowered teenager.

But another superpowered teenager?

Who also happened to know an adult that treated animals?

That could work in his favor.

"Kids are afraid of doctors all the time, and they're forced to go." It was useless speaking to a house that wouldn't ever respond. But it was easier to feel like he was talking to someone and not rambling his worries away into thin air. "So this is basically the same, right? Just instead of a regular tantrum, the kid can probably zap your eyes out the back of your head."

The house didn't answer, which was a shame because he thought that was a pretty good dark zinger.

He grabbed his computer and found the tab he'd been on before Shadow had vanished. Maddie's office opened at 9 am. It was still 8:49. Eleven minutes. That was all. Just eleven minutes and he could-

Could what?

Stone fell back onto the couch and stared at the ceiling.

"This is the issue," he told the house. "My former boss's enemies are, I'm pretty sure, these adults' kids. No confirmation on that yet, but I'm about 98 percent sure. And I spent a lot of time helping that boss try to destroy those kids. Which, if I'm right about the parent thing, I don't think Mister and Missus Wachowski will appreciate that much."

The house said nothing.

"But Missus Wachowski helps animals, and Mister Wachowski has a badge, and their three kids have super powers. So all in all, that's pretty handy for my current situation."

The house said nothing.

"Then again," Stone said, sitting up slowly. "Then again, Shadow never really belonged to Robotnik. Or maybe he did at some point as some kind of science fair project of Gerald's, but he doesn't anymore. So he wouldn't have much to do with *me* . Really this has nothing to do with me. I don't have hands in *any* of these alien pies. So technically, I could do nothing. Just walk away and let whatever happens happen, and it wouldn't do anything to me at all!"

The house, still, said nothing.

"Yeah," he said, nodding emphatically. "This has *nothing* to do with me! I *could* just leave. I haven't even unpacked yet! I could just get up now and take one of the cars and hit the road and never look back! And it wouldn't weigh on my conscience. At all."

The house was silent.

"It wouldn't," Stone insisted. "I'd feel *nothing* and that would be *fine* ."

A sharp wind blew from outside and one of the shutters flapped, banging softly open and closed again.

Stone threw up his arms. "Fine! *Fine* , you got me. I'd feel *awful* . Fucking hell, why do you always need to be *right?"*

The shutter banged again.

"Well screw you too," he muttered and slouched back onto the couch, staring at the clock on his computer, anxiously awaiting 9 am.

Getting back into the groove of things hadn't been as horrifically difficult as Maddie had feared, but it certainly wasn't *easy* . Especially now that one adult was less hands on and on

bedrest.

Especially when her eldest had a date with a nice girl from school and her husband had dealt with a bad night of pain and wanted nothing more than to sleep without being disturbed and there were two other superpowered children living under their roof and one of them, she was pretty sure, had stashed plutonium somewhere in the basement and the other one didn't really understand the idea of *peace and quiet* .

"Explain to me again why we're here?"

"Because your father needs *rest* ."

"He could rest with us there!"

"The last time I left you alone you built a skate ramp with laundry baskets, Sonic, and Tails almost blew up the garden shed. I'm not taking my chances."

"I fixed the hole!" Tails called out from where he was staring at an x-ray machine from the other room.

"That's not the point, honey, and you know it."

Sonic sulked back into the receptionist's chair. The usual man that worked Saturday morning shifts, Tyler, was running late taking his youngest to a doctor's appointment and Maddie had told him to take his time. She understood the stresses of juggling kids and daily life well enough. Especially when they were staring right back at her.

"I could've helped him out! I'm *good* at helping people."

"I know that, sweetheart." Maddie set her bag down and put her and her boys' lunches into the little fridge they kept behind the front desk. "You're *great* at taking care of people. But it isn't your responsibility today, alright? And besides, your older brother is out-"

Sonic groaned and sank lower into the chair. "All he's doing is flashing his muscles at the girl, telling her all about how he *saved the world* ."

"Zoe is very sweet!"

"Zoe is *so cool*. Which is why I don't understand what she sees in *Knuckles*. She's too good for him!" He stuck out his tongue. "And who cares about *dating* anyway."

"Well, apparently your brother does." She stood back up and pressed a noisy kiss between his ears. "Just hang out and relax. You brought your Switch and a book, and Tails brought… something that I hope is legal to work on. There weren't many appointments logged anyway so it'll probably be a slow morning."

"Mom!" Tails called from one of the rooms, popping his head out. "Can I x-ray my face?"

"No you may not!"

“Aw… Can I x-ray my tails?”

“Only if you put the lead smock on first!”

“Ok!”

Maddie shook her head, trying and failing not to smile. “Alright. I’ve got to go get vaccines ready for Mr. Jorgensens kittens.”

Sonic spun lazily in the desk chair. “What do I do if the phone rings?”

“Answer it,” she said, already heading for the medical supply room.

“Wait really?” He put a foot out to catch himself on the desk.

“Sure. If they can leave a message, write it down. If it’s an emergency, put them on line two and holler for me.”

“You got it, Mom! I am *so* on it!” He kicked off the desk, setting himself spinning again. “You could totally just call Tyler and tell him to take the day off, with how on it I’m gonna be! You just wai-whoa!” He toppled off the chair and onto the floor, zipping back up a second later. “So on it, Mom!”

“That’s good, baby! Thanks!” Maddie called from down the hall.

In the other room, the hum of the x-ray machine sounded, followed by Tails’ distinct giggle. “Oh that’s gonna be a good one.”

Sonic gave the chair another spin. “Oh yeah, Sonic the Phone…Answering- yunno what titles aren’t important. Doin’ the job well, *that’s* what’s important! And *that’s* what I’m gonna-”

BRRRIIIIIINNG! BRRRIIIIINNNG!

He toppled out of the chair again.

BRIIIINNG!

“IgotitIgotitIgotit!” He scrambled back into the chair, grabbing for the phone. “Green Hills Animal and Alien Hospital! We put the extra in Extraterrestrial!”

From down the hall, he heard Maddie snort. “We what?”

“I’m workshopping slogans, mom!” Sonic put his paw over the receiver. “People pay millions for this kind of stuff, you know?” He put the phone back to his ear. “Sorry about that.”

There was a laugh on the other line. “Is that Sonic Wachowski?”

“Yeeees?”

“It’s Sarah Brewster. You might not remember me, but I have Wally.”

“I remember him!” He did. A large, scruffy dog with droopy ears who had followed Sonic everywhere and held out an enormous paw in exchange for the liver bites his mom kept on the counter.

“I’m *sure* he remembers you, too. You gave him so many treats. He didn’t want to leave.”

“I’ve got more here for him! Is… is he okay?”

“Oh he’s *fine* . He just needs to get his vaccines scheduled. Think you can handle that?”

Sonic took down dates and wrote everything on the paper in front of him. “Mom, I’m *killing this*,” he shouted over his shoulder after he’d hung up the phone. “You should just take me out of school and hire me full time!”

“Totally,” Maddie shouted back. “I think my clients will really love it when I start using child labor.”

Sonic had an amazing quip back that his mother would have loved if the phone hadn’t rung again.

"Greeeeeen Hills Animal Hospital If it's got mange, fleas, or it's from other galaxies, we'll stick a needle in it!"

“I like that one even better!” Tail said, appearing at the desk with his x-ray in hand. “It’s got a rhyme in it.”

“We don’t *always* stick needles in things.” Maddie passed behind the desk, with a tray full of prepared vaccines.

“Mom, shush, I’m on the phone,” Sonic teased, waving her off and turning his attention back to the receiver. “What can we do ya for this fine morning, citizen?”

“… Is this Sonic?”

Sonic nearly fell off the chair for the second time that morning. He caught himself against the desk, sucking in a breath. “How did you- Why are you calling here? You *can’t* call here.”

“So it *is* Sonic,” Stone said. “Thought I recognized that voice.”

“Yeah, well, congrats. I recognized yours too. And you *can’t* call here,” Sonic said again, firmer. “This is where my *mom* works, so if you thought she was alone today, you’d better think again. I don’t care if your boss swapped sides at the end. I didn’t forget what you both did to us before, either.”

“So she *is* your mother. I was right.”

“Stone, are you listening to me? Leave my mom alone.” He slammed the phone down and stared out the windows in the front of the office, muscles tight, barely breathing.

“Stone?” Tails gripped the sides of his x-ray tighter. “Why was he calling here??”

“It doesn’t matter.” Sonic frowned. “We just have to make sure-”

“Who was that?” Maddie had returned from the exam room. “Boys, what’s wrong? What happened?”

Sonic had a look on his face she knew very well, his I’ve-gotta-protect-Mom-and-Dad-face, and it always made her nervous. He opened his mouth, but then the phone rang again. When she reached for it, he grabbed her hand.

“Sonic?”

“Mom, don’t.”

The phone continued to ring.

“Sonic, who *is* it?”

Tails tugged on the hem of her scrubs. “Robotnik’s sidekick! But we don’t know why he called or how he got your number!”

“Well, do we know what he wants?”

“Who cares?” Sonic’s face was still set in the serious way that she hated. “I won’t let him hurt you.”

She put her other hand on top of their joined ones, as the phone kept right on ringing. “I know, baby. I know. But I think it’s my turn to do some protecting now, alright?” His brow stayed furrowed but he nodded, and she picked up the phone. “Green Hills Veterinary Clinic.”

“Sonic, if you would just… You’re not Sonic.”

“I’m his mother.”

Sonic’s eyes widened. *Don’t tell him,* he mouthed.

It’s okay, she mouthed back. “And who am I speaking to?”

The question seemed to throw the man off balance, because it took him a few seconds to answer, “I- I thought he’d tell you-”

“Oh, he did. I’d just like to hear it from you, sir.”

Another seconds long pause. “My… uh, my name is Imaad Stone. I, um, I used to work for Dr. Robotnik.”

“And what can we do for you today, Mr. Stone?” At her side, she felt Tails lean against her legs. She would’ve petted his ears, but Sonic still had a firm grip on her free hand.

“I,” there was another pause and she heard him swallowing. “I need your help.”

She pressed her lips together, looking at her boys. “And what makes you think we’d be interested in helping you?”

“Because I’m not actually the one who needs your help.”

She had every reason to doubt him. Every reason to tell him to leave them alone for the rest of their lives.

But she’d worked with the public long enough to be pretty confident in her ability to sniff out BS. And she just wasn’t catching the scent.

“If not you, then who?”

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which Shadow is alone, and a meeting is held.

Chapter Notes

We have just been living off of the feedback and comments everyone sent our way. Truly, the both of us could not ask for a better reading audience, and we appreciate every one of you

With that in mind; have some whump and family feels for your service

Shadow was getting nowhere fast.

He kept having to stop himself from teleporting. It was such a second-nature way to get around, that each time he put too much weight on his right foot he started to picture a spot fifty yards away and had to reign in the urge.

It was made even worse by the fact that he could smell water, and he was so goddamn thirsty.

And there was water. A stream just a few yards ahead through the trees, running from the top of the mountain. He made his way forward and nearly tripped over a clump of grass. Righting himself and waiting for his ankle to at least calm its throbbing, he took a look at what had tripped him.

The earth where he was stepping looked different from the rest of the forest floor. Instead of the dirt and rocks and scattered leaves, there was instead a growing patch of roots all forming some kind of a hill until they funneled downward to a place he couldn't see. Careful of the roots, he stepped through them until he was near the center and could peek down.

He blinked.

He hadn't been in this part of the world for long, but he was pretty sure that hammocks weren't usually found growing underground.

Abandoning the stream for the moment, he used one of the vines to slide down into the hole, making sure it was strong enough to support his arms if he were to drag himself back up.

Even though his foot was still throbbing, he couldn't help but be grateful to that stupid piece of clumped grass. Because when he did reach the bottom and squinted through the dim light, he found a place that must have, at one point in time, been someone's home.

"Where did you come from…" He held onto the dirt wall and limped further through the little cave. In one corner there was the hammock he'd seen from above. There was some junk beyond that. A hollowed out dryer and a cracked mirror. Blankets that were moth eaten and smelled like mildew. Hidden in an alcove he found a small metal box with some kind of a movie on the front. It had been locked and protected from the elements. Tiny packs of gauze and a few odds and ends were scattered inside.

He opened it and looked for a spot to sit where he could properly wrap his ankle.

There was a shelf of rock just beneath the entrance above and he planted himself there, stretching out his ankle.

And that was when the drawings caught his eye.

They were a little like cave paintings he'd seen in a book once, long ago. Except these ones were newer, relatively. Newer and more colorful. He squinted and nudged closer until his nose was almost touching the dirt.

"Oh you've *got* to be kidding me!"

The blue, spiky-headed figure scrawled in a childlike hand into the rock was undeniable.

He pushed away from the wall with a snort. Of course. Of *course* this was *his* first. His miracle find was more like a slap in the face. Because if this was *his* place, his playhouse or fort or whatever, then that meant he'd probably be swinging by. Given Shadow's luck, it would be sooner rather than later.

So he couldn't stay.

He remained just long enough to replace the bark-splint with proper gauze and then he hauled himself back out through the entrance, to continue on towards the water.

"Are you sure this is the best way to have this meeting?" Sonic asked his mother, looking between her and Stone.

Stone was sitting on a spare chair that they'd brought into one of the exam rooms. Sonic and Tails sat on the exam table. Maddie stood by the door. All of them had a kitten in their hands. Stone had three. One in each hand and another currently trying to climb him like a mountain, little claws digging into his neck.

Sonic thought it looked especially uncomfortable.

Good.

“We just got a bunch of these stray kittens to vaccinate, neuter and spay, and find fosters or shelters for, and more are coming in next week,” Maddie explained. “Feeding takes more hands than I’ve got, so if Stone insists on needing our help, then I’m going to get him to use his.”

“I’m happy to,” said Stone quickly, trying to bottle feed one of the kittens while the second one screamed at him from on his lap. “I’m not much of an animal person though.”

“You don’t say,” said Sonic. “And here I thought you were such a natural.”

“Sonic,” warned Maddie, stepping closer to him, eyes on Stone.

“No. It’s fine.” Stone tried to wave her off but only managed to jostle one of the kittens, who gnawed on his wrist in return. “I probably deserve worse.”

“You do,” said Sonic.

Tails kicked him.

Sonic rolled his eyes. “But I *guess*,” he said, doing his best at being diplomatic, “you did just get out of a long term… situationship. Which definitely must suck. So. Yunno. I guess we’re almost halfway even.” Tails gave him another *whack* with his foot. “*And*,” Sonic added, “you found Shadow, which is what we’ve been trying to do.”

“And if you’re actually serious about helping us help him-” said Maddie.

Stone nodded. “I am.”

“-then we’re definitely happy to have another person on our side. And so long as that person doesn’t turn around to hurt my family, then I’d say we’re good.”

Stone tried to smile but winced when the kitten on his shoulder screeched into his ear. He reached up and brought it down to his lap with its brother, giving one of them a turn with the bottle. “All I know is that where he’s at isn’t good. I had him for a night in my house-”

“Wait. Pause.” Sonic gestured at him with the kitten, waving it around like a pointer. The living pointer purred. “Since when do you have a *house?”*

“Since this week, apparently.”

“In *Green Hills?”*

“It wasn’t my first choice either, but I didn’t build it.” Stone rolled his shoulders and took a fortifying breath. “And honestly I wasn’t planning on staying, either. If he hadn’t shown up, I would have been halfway to the East Coast or California by now. Anywhere but here. And then suddenly he’s literally dumped into my living room and I didn’t know what to do.” He switched kittens again, the one who’d eaten first apparently over its food coma already and trying to climb up his chest. “I had him with me there for a whole night. I figured, yunno. I’d give him somewhere to rest. Get him some food. Then he’d be *fine*.”

“Yeah, he didn’t look so good,” Tails said. “I’ve been rewatching the recordings from our security cameras. He seems… rough.”

“It’s not great,” Stone agreed. “And I can’t see it getting any better, either. I thought I had it all under control too. But then this morning…”

Maddie narrowed her eyes. “What about this morning?”

“I actually mentioned *you*, funny enough.”

She blinked, distrust falling away beneath genuine curiosity. “Me?”

“Yeah. I found you online. Your practice. And I thought that maybe I’d take him here. Get him fixed up. But the second I mentioned taking him to a doctor, having him see you, he was - *poof* - gone.”

Maddie hummed. She put down the kitten she’d been holding and took another from a box on the counter. “You know, he did the same with us, too. Vanished the second that we wanted him to come inside.”

“I don’t think he likes adults very much,” Sonic muttered.

“Or doctors,” his brother added. “But mom’s so *nice.*”

Stone shook his head. “I don’t think that’s gonna matter much. From what I got out of Gerald while he was here, Shadow was a walking science experiment for a long time before the lab was shut down. Then the army got to him. I don’t think he’s ever met an adult that’s done anything but hurt him.”

Maddie’s face was drawn, eyes sad, and she moved closer to her boys until she could stand just between them, her arms just touching their sides. “So then how are we even supposed to get him? He’s made it impossible so far.”

“Oh, I haven’t even told you the worst part yet.”

Sonic leaned backwards with a groan. “*Why* is it that whenever you’re around there’s always a *worse part*.”

“He’s missing an inhibitor ring.”

“An inhibawha?”

“Inhibitor ring,” Stone said, sounding out each syllable. “It’s like a… like a surge protector.”

“Use human words,” said Sonic. “I’m begging you.”

Tails jumped in before Stone could. “We’ve got them in our house,” Tails explained. “Or we had them in *most* of the house, but I added them to the outlets that were from when it was originally built.”

“That’s great, honey,” said Maddie. “But how about next time you tell us before you play with outlets?”

“I was *fine*, Mom. Only got shocked once. Anyway, it basically works like a sponge to soak up electricity. Too much and that’s how you get things like electrical fires or dead fuses. Like that time you plugged every single hair dryer into the living room.”

“Oh sure, you do that one time-”

“But,” continued Tails, “the protectors keep that from happening. Nothing goes wrong that way. Everything works the way that it should.”

“He’s not wrong,” said Stone. “And that’s what Shadow’s did for him. Soaked up extra chaos energy. Gave it somewhere to go. Without one he’s a live wire, and that’s all well and good for a little while, but too much and the power starts to attack the host. And it’s… not great.” He reached into his pocket for his phone and opened it, showing Maddie and her boys a picture of the couch he’d taken just that morning. “This was after he teleported out of my living room.”

For once, when Sonic muttered a curse, Maddie didn’t correct him.

“Poor Shadow.” Tails put a hand to his mouth. Then his eyes widened. “Wait!” He handed his kitten to Sonic and hurried out of the room, darting back in a moment later with his backpack. “Is this-” He pulled the golden band from the pack, holding it out for Stone to see. “-what you’re talking about?”

Stone gaped. “How-?”

Sonic shrugged, both kittens bobbing in his hands. “I mighta kinda sorta snagged it when Shadow was trying to leave our yard yesterday.”

“I spent all last night trying to figure out what it was, but I couldn’t get it open.” Tails turned the ring over and over in his hands. “What’s it made of?”

“An alloy that Gerald developed,” Stone said, still staring at the ring in Tails’ hand, stunned, “out of the meteor that housed Shadow when he first arrived on Earth.” The kitten he was feeding decided it was done and rolled away from the bottle, kneading its paws against his leg.

“No wonder my mass spectrometer couldn’t determine what it was made of.” Tails ran a thumb over the smooth surface. “It’s extra-terrestrial. Like us. I wonder…”

Maddie crouched next to her youngest. “What’re you thinking, baby?”

“Every element has a unique ion signature. I couldn’t match this one to anything in my database of Earth elements, but I don’t need to! I just need to identify what the ring’s signature *is* and then I can scan for it! I can find him!” He bounced on his heels. “Mom, I can *find* him!”

Stone was still staring, jaw slack. “That’s- You- Wow.”

Maddie pressed her cheek to Tails' temple. "That's my little genius."

"That's *awesome,* Tails," Sonic said, though his smile faltered. He lifted a kitten to his chin in thought. "There's just one problem. Even if we find him, how do we convince him to come with us?"

The smiles around the room all faded. Maddie squeezed Tails' shoulders. "That's part two of the plan. You work on part one. And we'll keep thinking."

Stone cleared his throat. "And what about me?"

Maddie actually paused at that. She pursed her lips and looked at her two boys, and then back at Stone. "You already have our address, I assume."

Stone looked like he wanted to lie and politely pretend that he had no idea what she was talking about, but the three sets of eyes on him were all too knowing. "Yeah. I've got it."

"And that's all you've got? Actually!" Maddie shook her head. "I don't want to know what else you've got on us. Let's just leave it at the address. I think we can consider that our home base for now. Not that I don't trust your new house but. I don't trust it. At all."

"Seems fair enough," said Stone.

Sonic glared at Stone. He had both kittens on top of his head now, making biscuits against his quills. "But don't get comfortable. You'll be on *my turf,* Stone. One foot out of line and you'll need to deal with me." Besides him, Tails coughed. " *And* my brothers," Sonic added diplomatically. "Got it?"

"We're trusting you," said Maddie. "Tentative as that trust is, we want the same thing as you do, I think. And I'd like to at least... try."

The kitten who'd been climbing Stone's chest finally made it to his shoulder. He turned his head to look at it. It looked back at him with wide, innocent eyes.

Then it sneezed into his mouth.

"Definitely on the same page," he said, wrinkling his nose and plucking the kitten gently off and back into his lap. "When do we start?"

Shadow had despised the prison where he'd grown up. Aside from *Her*, it had been stifling, full of needles and glass cages and cold steel tables and colder, steelier eyes. But if he could have said one good thing about G.U.N., it was that they were consistent. No matter the cruelty, treating him like a science experiment on legs, he'd been given water and shelter and three meals a day.

Now he was skeptical scooping water from a stream and looking around for something, anything, to eat in the forest. The town was farther down, and he'd need to get back that direction for any real supplies, but it would be dark eventually, and it would be at least two days with how slowly and gingerly he was able to move.

Thirst quenched, he began the slow and careful trek down the mountain, farther away from Stone's cabin.

Farther down a slope, past steep, weathered boulders, he happened to pass a field of trees and tangled plants. He plucked a few red berries off one of the lowest branches, chewing thoughtfully as he walked.

He wouldn't go back to Sonic's cave. But that didn't mean there weren't others. He could find one, surely, set up a base of operations. Already the amount of yellow and brown leaves on the ground were signalling that winter was on its way. Sleeping under the stars was fine when it was above sixty degrees, but once the snow started to fall? So shelter would be his main goal.

Who knew? Maybe being forced to move so slowly would actually aid his search.

He was just starting to let a glimmer of optimism settle in his chest when something wholly different took hold of his body.

Pain.

Tight, clenching, optimism-obliterating pain.

He curled in on himself, clutching his stomach. He hardly had time to think before he was emptying its contents out onto the grass.

Gasping, trembling, sweating, he fell to his knees and heaved again. Nothing but stomach acid splattered on the ground.

Panting, claws trying to pierce through his gloves, he waited for it to pass.

Through watering eyes, he could see the berries, still bright red against the mess in front of him, clearly the culprit.

Stupid. He could've died, from carelessly picking a handful of berries. But how was he supposed to know the difference? It wasn't like anyone had ever taught him anything.

Shakily, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and got back to his feet.

Screw shelter. His first priority was going to *have* to be food that wasn't poisonous.

Slowly, wobbling a bit, he forced himself to get moving again.

Chapter 7

Chapter by Humanities_Handbag

Chapter Summary

The Wachowski's have a very strange dinner guest over. And Shadow's having a not so fun day.

Chapter Notes

Happy Monday! Enjoy a new chapter!

Maddie had *meant* to text Tom, to update him on the Events of the Day. Truly, she'd meant to. She'd even *started* the text, rewriting it three times and still not being quite satisfied with it.

But then she'd had two emergency calls and one was a housecall for a horse, and in between those and her regular appointments, she hadn't gotten around to actually it.

And then she'd gotten the boys home and gotten Tom's evening medications ready and started staring at the pantry wondering what in the world she was going to feed them, when the knock on the door came.

Ozzie ran past, barking excitedly.

"I got it!" Tom was hopping down the hallway with his crutch before she could tell him to go sit down again. "I bet Knucklehead forgot his key again."

And even then, it didn't occur to her until she heard-

"Ah, oh! Good evening, Mr. Wachow- *whoa!* " Followed by the distinct sound of her injured husband trying to take a swing at the man on their porch.

"Mom!" That was Sonic from the living room in the middle of his homework. "Dad's trying to beat someone up at the front door!" He paused. "It's… kind of hard to watch. He's not doing great."

"Oh shit!"

" *Oh shit* is right, mother!"

“*Shoot*, Sonic. I said *shoot!* Tom, wait!” She ran out into the hall just in time to see Tom pushing himself up from where he’d slumped against the doorframe. Ozzie hovered just inside, still barking, tail wagging. She managed to push Ozzie back and then caught her husband around the chest before he could make another attempt. “We invited him, Tom! Stop it!”

“You what?” He turned disbelieving eyes on her.

“It’s a long story,” she started. When he frowned, she added, “That I was going to tell you, I swear. I completely forgot.”

“You *forgot* . You forgot about inviting Mister Evil Boulder here to our home?”

“Stone,” Stone corrected with a wave of a shopping bag. “And I brought an olive branch!” He looked at the bag again. “Not literally. It’s rosemary. But the gesture is the same.”

“ I thought I did! ” Maddie lowered her voice to a hiss. “ But as it turns out I didn’t actually send the damn text. ” When he gave her a look she added, “This isn’t exactly the craziest thing to happen in the past few days, Thomas.”

“Yeah, Thomas!” Sonic called from the living room. “It’s been a *shit* few days!”

“ *Sonic* .”

“You said the word first, Mom! Fair’s fair!”

“Can I say it?”

“Go for it, Tails!”

“Tails, do *not* listen to your brother.”

“Tails, you should absolutely listen to me as your brother! Ozzie would if he could. Right, Ozzie? You’d swear if you could, yes you *would* .”

Maddie let out a long, loud sigh and rubbed her temple with the hand that wasn’t supporting her husband. On the front steps, Stone was looking back and forth between her, Tom, and the house beyond with the open confusion of someone who had just realized his superpowered mortal enemies were nothing but semi-regular kids in a semi-regular family dealing with semi-regular chaotic day to day drama.

Tom kept glaring at Stone but did slowly drop his still outstretched crutch. “That’s… not *not* true,” he conceded.

“ *Thank* you. Now will you please go sit down?”

Still standing on the porch, one arm laden with a full grocery bag, Stone adjusted his tie with his free hand. “I mean, if this is a bad time…”

“Nope! Not a bad time. Just a missed communication.” Maddie took a few steps back, steering Tom with her, who finally began using his crutch again. “Come in, please. Did you say something about rosemary?”

“Oh! Yes.” He stepped carefully after them into the foyer. “I stopped in town for a bottle of wine and then the butcher next door had chicken liver and by then the ball was rolling so, um, I thought I’d, uh, make dinner?”

Tom stopped in the doorway of the living room. “Dinner?”

Stone hefted the paper bag on his hip. “If that’s overstepping, I-”

“It sounds lovely,” Maddie said quickly.

“It *does* ,” Tom agreed. “I’m just trying to figure out when Rod Serling’s gonna pop out and tell me I’m in an episode of the Twilight Zone.” Then he hobbled his way towards the couch.

Maddie reached for the bag. “Why don’t I stash this stuff for now? Tails? Is your homework done so you can work on your new project?”

“Yup!” The fox kit trotted out into the foyer as Stone let Maddie take the groceries. “C’mon, Mr. Stone. My lab is out in the garage.”

“You have a lab?”

“Yup! Dad and my brothers built it for me!” The boy grabbed Stone by the hand, leading him back out the front door. “Wait ‘til you see it, it’s awesome! And it should have everything we need.”

Maddie watched them go, Stone hunched forward as her youngest pulled him along down the stairs and around to the garage, still chatting away. It might not have been the *craziest* thing to happen that week, but it was still pretty high on the list.

Unlike Tom and his laughably pathetic attempt at a swing with a crutch from just hours before, Maddie knew that her eldest was definitely much more capable. Which meant that she was at the door as soon as she got the text he was on the way back. She saw him through the trees before he’d even arrived; a red blur lighting up the tops of the trees until he was standing in the previously empty space in front of her.

“Hello, mother.”

“Hey, baby. How was your date?”

“Oh it was most enjoyable, yes,” he nodded, which was all she ever got out of him about anything he did with his girlfriend of three months now. If she pushed for details, his muzzle would match the rest of him and he’d excuse himself to go find Tom, who *would* get details. She tried not to let it bother her. There were just some things a sixteen (almost seventeen) year old was never going to want to talk to his mom about. Today though, it was really the furthest thing from her mind.

“That’s great, sweetie. You got your homework done before you went out, right?”

“Of course I did, that was what we had agreed upon.” He tried to step into the house, but she stayed planted in her spot and he frowned. “Why are you blocking the door?”

“Honey, we need to talk, first.”

Knuckles was good enough to listen to Maddie and nod. It did not mean, however, that he wouldn’t sit at the kitchen island with both fists out in front of him, glaring at the back of Stone’s head.

“I’m not in any danger, am I?” Stone asked Maddie, glancing back every so often from where he was searing livers. Ozzie sat at his feet, patiently waiting for anything that might fall on the floor.

“You’re fine,” said Maddie.

“Mother, I must request again to help our guest, the Goat Milker, cook,” said Knuckles, staring at Stone. “Perhaps I can chop vegetables. With a knife. I am very good with a knife.”

“Thank you for offering, sweetheart, but I think we’re going to let Stone do his thing.”

“That was not a real offer,” Knuckles whispered loudly to Stone. “It was a threat. It was very subtle.”

“It really wasn’t, honey,” said Maddie.

“That is because you are a genius, mother.”

“It wasn’t subtle,” said Tom from the kitchen table, crutches leaning on a chair. “Maybe we can work on that another time, big guy .”

Tails was back from his lab and closed the back door behind him, hovering onto a stool besides his eldest brother. The ring was in his hands and he carefully placed it in front of himself. “Did Knuckles try subtlety again? I told him it wasn’t his strong suit.”

Knuckles grumbled and went back to glaring at Stone.

“Relax, Knux.” Sonic was beside Tom and was drawing something on his cast. “We’re all here for the same reason.”

“I suppose that is true…”

“And without him we wouldn’t have figured *this* out,” said Tails and gestured to the ring. “And thanks to Stone we’re actually going to be able to *track* Shadow down.”

“Hopefully sooner than later,” Stone added. “His powers are short circuiting so there’s some difficulty. *But* -”

“But we know he’s still in Green Hills!” Too excited to keep it in, Tails cut Stone off and beamed at his family. “It’s a wide radius, I know. But from the energy signals alone, he doesn’t have enough of it to teleport anywhere far, at least not *well* . So the chances of him staying here are good.”

“Which means our chances of finding him are even better,” added Maddie.

Sonic switched colors on whatever piece of artwork was going on his Dad’s cast. “Now we just have to figure out what to do while we’re searching for him. I don’t know about you, but I’d actually like some kind of a plan in the meantime. This guy might be powerful, but he is *slippery* .”

“A plan? You?” Tom asked with a smirk.

Sonic threw a marker cap gently at his father’s chest. “Yes, *me!* I was alone forever, remember? I’m the expert on this. I actually know what it’s like to- oh my god, Dad, *please* stop looking so sad. We agreed I’d start telling you more last year. You should be used to me dropping these depressing truth bombs at this point.”

Tom rolled his misty eyes and leaned forward to drop a kiss between his son’s ears. Sonic gawked. “ *Not in front of a guest* ,” he hissed, but ducked his head to hide a pleased smile. “Anyway, I knew that you always left out food and blankets and whatever, so I stayed closer and closer and dropped my guard enough until eventually… yunno. You caught me.”

Stone paused his stirring. “What does that mean, *he caught you* .”

Sonic let out a single boisterous *ha!* “Oh, you didn’t know? The only reason I’m adopted was because my Dad here got one good shot in with a tranq gun.”

“And we are so grateful for that single act of stupidity,” cooed Maddie, moving towards Sonic to ruffle his fur.

“We really should frame that dart at some point,” Tom added. “But I do get your point. We probably should get a system going. Keep him nearby. I’d feel better, anyway, knowing he was getting steady meals and whatever he needs.”

“Speaking of meals,” Tails said, leaning with elbows on the countertop. “When do *we* eat? The smell’s making me *so* hungry!”

“Just another few minutes,” Stone told him, and Maddie caught the hint of a fond smile on his face.

She tapped each of her boys on the shoulder as she walked behind their stools. “Why don’t you guys get the table set, hm?”

As Tails lifted off into the air and Sonic capped his markers, Knuckles asked, “How do we know he is not attempting to poison us with this meal?”

“Because you literally watched him make it,” she reminded him.

“Watched him like a hawk,” Tom added. “Unless you feel like maybe your vigilance lapsed at some point?”

“Of course not!”

“Well there ya go then. No poison, just,” he waved a hand at what was already spread out on the dining room table- long rolls, lettuce, tomatoes, garlic paste and pomegranate seeds. “...some sort of sandwiches.”

“Whatever they are, they smell amazing,” Tails chirped, fists full of silverware.

“What kinda meat is it, again?” Sonic asked, arms laden with dishes.

“Should I open up that bottle of wine?” Maddie asked, specifically not answering his question.

“By all means,” Stone said. Carefully, he moved the unidentified livers from the skillet to a bowl. At his feet, Ozzie’s tongue lolled out of his mouth.

Tom sighed. “What I wouldn’t give for a beer.”

“The doctor said whenever you’re ready, you can stop the heavy pain meds,” Maddie reminded him, rubbing his shoulders.

“You go get me a six pack of something hoppy, and I’ll pour the rest of ‘em down the drain tonight.”

She kissed his cheek. “Deal.”

“Blech.” Sonic made a face as he laid the last plate down. “Save that stuff for after I go to bed, will ya?”

“Not a chance.” Grinning, Tom caught Maddie around the waist as she moved to get the corkscrew and drew her back in close for an exaggerated kiss.

Sonic gagged, Tails snickered, and Knuckles busied himself getting glasses down from an upper cabinet.

Bringing the serving bowl to the table, Stone looked around at them all and Maddie caught the expression of a man who might've been wondering if his life’s previous mission had been more than a little misguided. Well, good. Better late than never, she supposed.

The sun was barely a glimmer on the western horizon, the sky a deep pink, and Shadow had yet to find either shelter *or* food. The only other cave he’d come across had had animal bones littered outside and he was in no mood (or condition) to get into a fight with a bear or a mountain lion or whatever else roamed up here. And after the first disastrous foraging experiment he got queasy just *looking* at the plant life.

But he was *so* hungry. And *so* tired.

He let himself rest a moment, under an outcropping of rock, easing down and stretching his bandaged leg out in front of him. It throbbed consistently now, which didn't seem like a good sign. And was it dirt on the gauze, or was the discoloration coming from underneath?

He was afraid to find out.

But he knew one thing;

This was bad.

So, *so* bad.

For not the first time, he lamented that the Eclipse Cannon explosion hadn't done its job.

His stomach made a pitiable noise and he laid a hand across it. Of all the ways to go, starving in the mountains of Montana was really far down the list.

Closing his eyes, he let his head fall back against the mossy stone.

And that was when he heard it.

The rustling of the leaves.

Just to his left.

Keeping as still as he could, he opened his left eye.

A rabbit was sitting not three feet from him. It was helping itself to whatever vegetation was still growing under the dead leaves. It hadn't even noticed he was there.

With his hunger the only thought in his head, he lunged, so quick it didn't have time to react, catching it by the throat.

He hadn't known that rabbits could scream.

But this one was now screaming, and thrashing under his hands.

He tightened his grip.

The scream became choked, and the thrashing more erratic.

It was horrific.

He was so hungry.

Just a minute more. Surely that's all it would take.

Another sound joined the screaming -a terrible, awful wail- and it took a second to register that it was coming from his own throat.

He let go.

The rabbit was gone in seconds.

He didn’t watch to see where it went. Instead he stared at the tears that rained down on his splayed hands.

With his chest just as achingly empty as his stomach, he buried his face in his hands.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Wachowski Family enjoy dinner and Knuckles has a change of heart (via his stomach).

Maddie assumed that for Stone, seeing their family around the dinner table was probably a little like watching a very gentle car crash. Her kids had manners and knew how to behave well enough, but that didn't mean it didn't have its quirks. The boys talked over one another, sometimes cutting one another off to get in a word. There were jibes and jabs and the more than occasional joke thrown from child to parent. More than once an over-eager dog had to be shooed away from the table. There was laughter and eye rolls and conversation passed along with plates and glasses.

From Maddie's point of view, it was a family dinner.

From the way Stone was staring at the lot of them, it was something akin to reality slapping him right across the face.

"This isn't what I pictured when I thought about your. Uh.." He gestured around the table.

Maddie furrowed her brows. "... Family?"

He nodded slowly. His comment was candid, looking at Maddie as the boys all began sitting around the table, helping to fill water glasses.

Tails laughed. "What? Did you think we were off hunting and brooding in the woods or something?"

"Well, I mean-"

"Oh dude," said Sonic. "You totally did."

"I just didn't think you all… lived together! Or did… this!"

"Did th- you mean *eat?"*

Stone floundered, trying to find the words.

"We're just a family," said Maddie, saving Stone from himself and taking the water pitcher from Knuckles when he passed it over. "I mean. We're non-traditional, I guess. But still."

“The brooding and hunting in the woods sounds kind of cool, though,” said Sonic, staring down at whatever his dad was pushing closer to him. “Can I do that instead?”

“Sure,” said Tom. “That’s one less person to buy groceries for.”

“And we can turn your half of the attic into a gym,” said Maddie.

Sonic rolled his eyes and grabbed the serving spoon. “You guys just don’t understand my vision,” he grumbled and made up his plate.

The way the table was arranged, Maddie had seated herself at the head with Thomas on the other. Stone had placed himself to her left, Sonic right beside him. Apparently this wasn’t the normal setup, as Sonic had very loudly pointed out when Knuckles stole *his seat* to which their parents pointed out that there were no reserved seats (they apparently sat closer to one another, usually, but Stone guessed their choice of seats had something to do with strategically overseeing him), though even they stared at Knuckles curiously.

Apparently Knuckles was intent on sitting right beside his mother and directly across from Stone.

“Do you want some liver?” Stone asked carefully, clearing his throat when his voice cracked.

Knuckles continued to glare at him from across the table. “I will eat your food,” he told Stone. “But it is only because there is no other option.”

“Okay.”

“You are lucky I am very hungry.”

“Yup.”

“If you attempt to poison anyone in this family I will stick your head through the wall.”

“Totally, got it.” Stone cleared his throat again. “Listen, I’m really happy to be here. Honestly. It’s nice to be with people again. And I mean. We all want the same thing, right? So. Truce?”

“There will never be a truce,” said Knuckles, narrowing his eyes. “And I will never think of you as anything more than a small, weak man with questionable taste in partners.”

It only took Knuckles one minute and two bites of Stone’s food to completely turn around.

“You are *a very important and powerful man*,” Knuckles told Stone for the third time, serving himself a second sandwich. “And I apologize for what I said before. Mister Robot did not deserve you!”

“Uh - thanks?”

“Dad!” Sonic was staring at his plate in awe. “*This* is what vegetables are supposed to taste like?”

“Sonic-”

“What the hell have you been doing to them?!”

“*Sonic.”*

“Cruel and unusual," Tails agreed, mouth full. “Whatever they did to those vegetables is a *crime*.”

“Criminal,” agreed Sonic, looking near tears.

“Gee, thanks boys,” said Maddie, pouring herself another glass of wine. “Really feeling appreciated over here.”

“I love you so much, Mother,” said Knuckles. “I would lay my soul and my life out for you. Please do not attempt to cook vegetation for us again. It will only make me sad for you and Father’s lack of culinary talents.”

“I guess we’re scratching steam-in-bag microwave veggies off our grocery lists.” Tom looked more and more like he was wishing he could have a beer.

“There’s really nothing wrong with frozen vegetables,” Stone said. “They actually might retain *more* nutrients than fresh. It’s just in the preparation-”

Sonic lunged forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped. “Please teach them!”

The fond smile Maddie had seen earlier was ticking up across his face again. “I mean, I think we’ve got pressing matters right now… and only if they want that,” he added, darting unsure looks at the other adults.

Tom and Maddie exchanged a look. Tom blew out a breath. “If that’s what it takes to get this kid to not feed all his veggies to the dog.”

A little cheer rose up from the three aliens.

There weren’t any leftovers when the meal was done (much to Ozzie’s dismay), which made cleanup a breeze, and made all three boys just a little disappointed.

“What are you cooking us tomorrow night?” Sonic asked as he helped Knuckles load the dishwasher.

“Uh.”

“Sonic,” Maddie chided, digging her rubber gloves out from under the sink.

“Mom! Look at him! He *needs company*. I’m doing him a favor, really.”

“ *Sonic.* ”

“No, it’s fine. He’s not wrong,” said Stone, taking a rag to help Maddie by drying. “It’s been. Nice. To be around all of this. My house isn’t- there’s really not much there except for me.”

“See, Mom! My charm never fails!”

“Yes, sweetheart. And such a bastion of humility, too.”

“*Hell* yeah, I am.” He flashed her a grin, and then smacked his big brother playfully on the arm. “Yo. Street Fighter?”

“You only enjoy that game because it is the only way you are able to defeat me in combat.”

“Chicken.” Then he zipped off with the echidna hurrying after, shouting that he was *‘not a flightless bird!’*.

Maddie laughed fondly and handed Stone a plate. “You know, you are welcome whenever you’d like. Not just because you’re a fantastic cook, either. We definitely like having more adults around.”

“Here here,” said Tom from the kitchen island, looking as antsy as he was feeling. “There’s only so much I can hear about video games. And it’s always good for Tails to have someone listen to what he’s talking about and actually understand. I think he’s catching on to my *just keep nodding* routine.”

“Speaking of *routines*.” Maddie finished the last dish and handed it to Stone, who dried it and placed it back into the cabinet. “What are we going to do about our elusive friend in the woods?”

“Sonic had a good point before.” Stone folded the dish towel and hung it on the oven’s handle. “Keeping him close to a base is a safe bet until we can get him closer.”

“When Sonic was nearby, it was because he was *taking* things from us,” said Tom. “But this time we know about Shadow. So instead of just putting things outside because we left them there-”

“We leave them there on purpose,” finished Maddie with a nod. “We’ll set up something for him. Leave food. Blankets.”

Stone leaned back against the counter. “He might not take anything we leave. Little dude’s got a lot of pride. I basically had to reverse-psychology him into eating last night. But it can’t hurt to try.”

Still at the table next to Tom, Tails drummed his fingers on his chair. “I wish we could narrow down the tracker’s radius. At the scale we’ve got, we might as well be telling everyone in town.”

Tom’s eyes lit up. “You might be onto something, little guy.”

“Really?”

“We’ve done it before,” Tom reasoned. “Last spring…” He trailed off, looking in the direction of the living room. “Sonic ran away from home.”

Stone startled, stricken, but said nothing.

Tails put a hand atop his father’s. “And we got a lot of help in getting him back. Wade, and people from school, and Carl.”

Tom took the boy’s hand, squeezing. “Think you boys could make us another poster? I gotta get a BOLO out pronto.”

“You bet!”

Tom tapped his hands twice on the counter, looking at Maddie when he said, “and it’ll be *great* to be back in the office again…”

“As long as you’re staying *at your desk* , Thomas Wachowski.”

“I will!” He held up two fingers. “Swear it! And I’ll even get Wade to give me a ride and everything.”

“Break started on Saturday,” said Tails. “One of us can go with him, Mom! Make sure he stays sitting!”

Stone looked between them. “Break?”

“Fall break,” explained Maddie. “From school.”

“They go to *school, too?”*

This time it was Tails that answered, rolling his eyes down at the gold cuff. “If you’re going to be surprised by every normal thing we do with our family, we’re going to be here all night.”

Stone was sent home with the family saying their goodbyes on the porch and promises to come back soon.

“You promise you’ll leave out stuff,” Sonic grilled him while he walked down the porch steps.

“Totally promise.”

“I’ll check,” said Sonic. “You know I will!”

“I absolutely know.”

“And come back soon!” Tails waved, one hand petting down Ozzy’s back.

“Please,” said Knuckles. “I will waste away if you do not.”

“They’ve done fine so far,” Tom muttered to Maddie, but still offered Stone a wave.

“Well,” said Maddie, closing the door after Stone’s tail lights had vanished through the treeline down the road, “that wasn’t as much of a disaster as I thought it would be.”

“Are you kidding me, Mom?” Sonic leaned dramatically against the kitchen counter, staring wistfully towards the fridge. “We ate everything. There’s nothing left over. What are we going to do until he gets back?”

“Starve, I expect.” She scratched the top of his head, looking towards the closed front door just down the hall. “Why don’t you help me go through the pantry and then we can scrounge up some blankets from the basement. It’ll be good to get started on that tonight.”

Despite the dramatics (and more than frequent denials), she could always count on her middle child to offer up soft affection in spades. And he did; leaning into her legs until she knelt down so he could wrap his arms properly around her and she could do the same. “He’s going to be okay, right?”

“With you looking out for him? I don’t see how he couldn’t be, Blueberry."

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which boxes are packed and Houses are made of Stones.

It was very nearly a somber affair.

For Maddie and Tom.

Sonic seemed *more* than happy to give his advice as they loaded a cooler with everything he thought Shadow might need should he find his way back to them.

“This is what I would’ve wanted while I was out there!” He hefted another two blankets from the attic cheerfully onto the kitchen island before zipping off, completely unaware of his parents and their grief stricken faces.

“Is this bumming you out as much as it’s bumming me out?”

“Yup,” Maddie sighed, rubbing her temples. “I mean, I know we've been talking about it with him, but *holy shit.”*

Tom groaned into his hands. “Holy shit seems about right.”

“And oh man!” Sonic was back with boxes in his hands from their medicine cabinet. “I sprained my ankle *so bad* one year, I basically ended up wrapping it in old t-shirts I took from your clothing drive stuff, so painkillers and bandages are a *must!”*

“Thanks bud,” Tom mumbled into the counter where his face was planted.

“No problem- Oh! And water bottles! I got *so sick* drinking river water in the creek behind the house my first year hanging here. And the river by my cave. And the lake. And- well, you get the picture!” He was off again, zipping to the pantry. “Oh, and snacks! Gotta have snacks! I didn’t eat for like *three days* one time and it totally messed with me!”

“I’m going to grab that boy in *such a hug* when he’s done,” Maddie ground out. “Never letting him go. He’s going to hate it, and I don’t care.”

“Oh, absolutely. Giving him *all* the forehead kisses after this.”

“All of them,” agreed Maddie. She paused for a moment. “And then booking us a therapy session.”

“You’re a genius.”

The cooler was placed on the front porch with a sign taped to the front. FOR SHADOW was written in big block letters with TAKE WHAT YOU NEED written beneath it.

And (because Maddie and Tom were true to their word) when Sonic scampered back to the kitchen before bed, ready for their nightly ‘pay the toll’, he found himself being pulled up into a lap and bombarded with love.

“You guys! Quit it!” He laughed, squirming half-heartedly.

“Nope.” Maddie pressed her lips to his cheek with a loud *mwwwaaahhh* before going in for another and another, smushing their faces together in the process. “I just love this face so much. So you’ve got to deal *(mwah)* with *(mwah)* it *(mwah mwah mwah)!”*

“Ditto.” Tom scratched behind his ears with his good hand, ruffling Sonic's fur to standing.

“Tails! Knuckles! Help! Mom and Dad are attacking me with love and I need somebody to tag in, please!”

It took less than thirty seconds for his brothers to barrel into the kitchen, smiles wide.

“Love attack!” Tails cheered, sailing straight into Tom’s chest.

Knuckles stood beside Sonic and Maddie, bouncing like a boxer in the ring, one mitt extended. “Tag me, brother! I am prepared to relieve you!”

Maddie laughed as Sonic slapped his brother’s palm and she reluctantly let him go, welcoming her eldest into her embrace. “Oh, so noble.” She treated him to the same noisy kisses as his right leg thumped the ground.

After teeth were brushed and lights were beginning to turn off, Sonic wandered downstairs to where his parents were watching TV, climbing between them and burying his face into Maddie’s shoulder. “Just so you know,” he mumbled, “I really am okay, now.”

“I know that, Blueberry.”

“And I’m really happy I have you guys.”

“We’re happy we have you, too,” Tom added, scratching Sonic’s back. “Just… hard to hear sometimes.”

Maddie nodded. “Because we love you so much.”

"So, so much," agreed Tom.

Sonic sniffled. “Gross,” he said, before hugging them both and heading back up to bed.

The porch lights were on when Stone pulled into the driveway, even though he couldn’t remember switching them on before he left.

When the recessed lights flicked on upon his setting foot inside, he realized what was going on. “Hi House.”

The lights in the main bedroom blinked on in response.

He looked at the open doorway.

“No, House.”

The bedroom lights stayed on.

He frowned. “I’ve been sleeping upstairs. You know that. I know you know that.” He put his keys down on the console table a little harder than he’d meant to. He was purposefully more deliberate with his coat and his shoes. “Turn those lights off.”

The bedroom lights stayed stubbornly on.

“Damn it, House.” He stomped to the bedroom doorway. The pair of beds were exactly as they’d been when he’d arrived.

He hadn’t meant to look at them.

The first time he had, it had been in the dark. With the lights on, he realized that, while they were paired, they weren’t identical. The bed against the inside wall had a more ornately-carved headboard, while the bed against the windows leaned more modern, minimalist. The quilts matched, but were in different color schemes. One red and black, one purple and charcoal. The rug between them incorporated all four colors. And on the rug, tucked a bit under each bed, were two pairs of slippers.

He heard a hitch of breath and realized it was his own.

On the far wall, a door slid open and another light switched on.

Like a moth to a flame, he followed its glow into a pass-through closet.

On one side, there were immaculately pressed suits that he didn’t need to inspect to know would fit him perfectly. On the other, there were lab coats and khakis. Each side held its own bathrobe, in colors that matched the quilts.

“*Damn it*, House.” The words were thick in his throat and even thicker on his tongue. His fingers brushed the sleeve of the red robe and it slid from its hanger. He caught it before it hit the floor. He tried to put it back. But his hands wouldn’t let it go. Instead, they drew it close to his chest, and, even though it was stupid and pointless and *weak*, he dipped his face into the fabric.

It didn’t smell like anything.

Not motor oil.

Not mushrooms.

Not Tapatïo.

Nothing.

"*Damn it, Ivo.*"

With a sob, he sank to the floor.

Shadow didn't eat that night.

He also didn't move from his spot under the outcropping. As far as shelter went, it was paltry, but he just couldn't find the strength to pick himself up and search anymore. Instead, he watched the shadows stretch across the forest floor until it was all one big shadow, wishing it would swallow him up.

Gingerly, he laid down, trying to find a comfortable spot where roots didn't scratch his burns and rocks didn't dig into his back. He was just allowing himself to close his eyes, when he noticed that the stars had come out.

More stars than he'd ever seen.

The lights from Reno had dimmed them outside the base, and the sun rising over the Earth had obscured them on the moon. But out here, with no sun and no city, they spread across the sky like nothing he'd ever seen before. More than just pinpricks in a blanket of black, they painted the night. Like the universe had split in two so gently; a dam of dark broken and spilling out galaxies.

He wondered idly what Maria would have thought. That maybe, somehow, she'd found ways to pick away at the threads holding the sky together just so he could see how far back the stars really shone when they burst through.

"I don't know what I'm doing." The sky didn't respond. He didn't expect it to. But a few of the stars glimmered back curiously. "I'm supposed to be one of the strongest beings in the universe, but out of that *place*… I don't think I'm much of anything at all."

The stars continued to flicker silently at him.

"All I ever wanted to be was *free*," he sighed. "I just never thought I'd be so bad at it."

Somewhere far away, a coyote howled.

He shuddered. "I said I didn't know what I'd do without you. But when-" His breath caught. "-when I said it, I never imagined I'd *have* to." His eyes were burning. He let them. "Maria… what am I supposed to do?"

The stars couldn't give him an answer.

So he shut his wet eyes, rolled over onto his side, and waited for the exhaustion to grant him a reprieve.

It took Stone an hour to get off the floor. But he did, eventually. “That wasn’t cool,” he told House. “But… I get why you did it. So. Thanks, I guess.”

The house flashed the lamp on his bedside table; a little too cheerful for his liking. He sighed. “You do realize that I don’t *want* to stay here. I never unpacked for a reason.”

The bedside light flashed again, more insistently. And before he could rebuttal, the light outside the room flashed. And then one of the sconces on the wall.

Taking the hint, he wandered until he was standing facing the living room. One of the lights above the couch was on and acting as a spotlight to the cushions he’d had yet to clean. For as fastidious as he was, it had made him feel sick with *something* whenever he looked at them, and so he’d been doing a bang up job ignoring the elephant (or, rather, hedgehog) in the room.

He let out a long breath. “Yeah, I know. I can’t leave. Not until we have this wrapped up. Not until I find... Well. Not until I find what we're looking for.”

The next flickering of lights felt almost smug. He showed his appreciation with a carefully curated hand gesture before heading back to bed.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which Stone and Shadow get up and start another day.

Stone got the text while he was making coffee. With Shadow out *somewhere* beyond reach and a plan in the works between him and the Wachowskis, it helped to have some kind of a routine. Which meant coffee, breakfast, and maybe even the Wordle if he could find someone to share it with. It was a feat just to do those simple tasks with the way his hands kept shaking, eyes flicking towards the front door every few moments. But when the alternatives were to gnaw on the walls or run full speed into the woods trying to find a time bomb of a teenager, hanging on to some kind of a schedule was the best he could do.

He'd just figured out the fancy new steamer when his phone buzzed. He chose to ignore it, at least until he'd gotten the rest of his breakfast, but that didn't seem to be an option for him, because when he opened the fridge to grab yogurt (courtesy of the Green Hills Fresh Mart) the screen that usually only gave him options for crushed or cubed ice decided to instead tell him that he had a *Text from Madeline Wachowski.*

"I'll text her back," he said. "Just let me get breakfast."

The ice screen went black before jumping back to life to tell him that the text had said *Call me when you can.*

He closed the fridge, rolling his eyes. "And I *will* call her." He shuffled through a cabinet for granola. "Can you give me a minute?"

Apparently the house could *not* give him a minute, because he hadn't even opened the box in his hands before his phone was automatically making a call.

He dropped the box, granola spilling out across the kitchen floor, and lunged for his phone. "How in the hell did you even-!?"

"Hello? Stone? You there?"

Stone glared up at the ceiling. He covered his phone in one hand. "First thing tomorrow, I'm getting a *flip phone*. You hear me?"

From the living room a speaker began to softly play Journey's *I'll be Alright Without You.*

He scoffed.

"Stone? Hello?"

He finally put the phone to his ear, turning his back to the living room and reaching down to pick up his box of granola. “Sorry, Maddie. I’m having a fight with my house.”

“… what?”

“Nothing. Forget it.” He topped off his yogurt and sat at one of the bar stools around the kitchen island. “What’s up?”

“Oh! Right, uh. Well, I’m on my way to work right now-”

“Hi, Mister Stone.”

“How’s it hanging, Sto-Bro?”

“-and if you can’t tell, I’ve got two of my boys with me, *who definitely promised they’d be quiet during this call.*”

“Sorry, Mom!”

“*I’m* not sorry. I promised no such thing, Mother, and if my lawyer, Miles, would care to play back the tape-”

“Sonic, Mom said *quiet!”*

“She said to be quiet during the *call.”*

“What do you think is happening now!?”

“Quiet isn’t silent, Tails!”

“You’re not doing *either!”*

“Well how am I supposed to when you’re *yelling at me!”*

“If both of you can’t quiet down in the next five seconds then *neither of you* are helping me with the kittens and you can both join your Father manning the phones at the sheriff's office instead!”

The bickering abruptly stopped.

Stone snorted. “Are your mornings always like this?”

“Oh, this ranks as *peaceful* in our world.” She let out a long sigh. “Anyway. I just called to let you know that last night Tom got the sheriff's office and some of the surrounding stations to put out a BOLO on Shadow.”

That got Stone’s attention, the bar stool nearly tipping with how quickly he sat up. “No kidding.”

“He’s officially got an AMBER alert out, and from what Tom told me, the town is already sending in their support. Some of the forest rangers volunteered to do lookouts and extra

rounds and report back. So *hopefully* we'll get some news. Sooner than later, but we're managing our expectations here."

"That's… oh my god, Maddie. That's-"

Her laugh sounded nothing short of fond. "Yeah, that's our little town for you. Full of characters, but they're mostly just great people who step up when you need them to. It helps that a lot of them know and love the boys, too, so they'll definitely have an idea of who to look for."

Whatever had been twisted tight around his heart the past two days loosened. Not by much. But enough to notice. To feel.

Dare he even say; to *hope*.

"And if someone does call in?"

"You'll be the first to know, I promise. Tom's got your number now and they've got their instructions to loop you in first thing."

"Thank you, Maddie. Just… just *thank you."*

"We'll figure this out, Rock and Roll," said another voice he recognized as Sonic's, piping in from the background. "Wachowski's never back down from a fight, and we always take care of each other."

It had felt so impossible to smile, but somehow that managed to break the ice. His smile was faint, but it was there.

Maddie broke through his reverie. "I'm at work, but if you need anything you just call me. Either I'll answer or, if you're *lucky*, one of my boys will."

"That sounded an awful lot like *sarcasm*, Mother dearest!"

"I'm good at answering the phone, Mom!"

"I know you are, Tails. I'm talking about your older brother and his never ending charm."

"Hey! Just so you know, I'm *the best* at answering the phones. Stone would be lucky-!"

"Stone, if I accidentally feed one of my kids to my client's snake, you're my alibi."

"Wha-! Do you hear the abuse I have to endure, Stone?!"

"I'm just joking, honey. I'd never feed you to my client's snake."

"*Thank* you."

"Your quills would hurt it."

"Mother!"

“I’ll talk to you later, Stone!”

“Feel free to come by tonight and cook more amazing food so I don’t have to force down whatever slop Dad and Mom-”

The call abruptly ended.

Stone blinked, and then laid the phone back on the counter.

Well. It was something. It wasn’t actual *news* , but it was something.

He finally put a spoonful of yogurt and granola in his mouth. Woke up his phone again to do the Wordle. Maybe Maddie played. Though with a house that full, how would she find the time?

He still couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that they’d willingly, *legally* adopted three superpowered aliens. On their way to a fourth, if the plan was successful, he assumed. What sort of people could just… do that?

Good people, that’s who.

They’d never actually discussed those details, but with their track record, it almost seemed like the only option. Shadow was lucky there were people like that in the world. After everything he’d been through, it was what the kid deserved.

He stared down into his still mostly full bowl of yogurt, suddenly not hungry anymore. He set it back inside the fridge. And when he got around to finishing his coffee, he tried not to think about how it tasted like ash in his mouth.

“Just relax.” He wandered towards the living room, sitting on the farther side of the couch away from the cushions he hadn’t washed. Staring at them, he got up and flipped them around, away from himself, before sitting back down again. “You’ve got to relax,” he muttered, fumbling for the remote. “They’ve got this under control. They know what they’re doing.”

He turned on the TV, trying to find something mindless to watch, but all he wound up doing was changing channels every few seconds before entering and leaving streaming apps again and again.

“They know what they’re doing,” he told himself again, more insistently. “They’ve *got this.* You’ll help out when they need you to help out. You can just forget about it and relax and get ready to *leave.”*

He finally found a show with a laugh track. It felt just stupid enough to let him shut down his spinning mind.

He did try. He truly did try. But no matter what he did, his eyes kept flickering towards the flipped cushions and the front door and his phone. One after the other. Cushions, front door, phone, cushions, front door, phone, cushions, front door-

He flipped off the television and grabbed the nearest pillow, holding it to his face just to let out the loudest scream he could manage. It didn't help.

"I'm not going to get overly involved," he told the ceiling. "There's no reason for me to get involved."

The House said nothing.

"And besides, they're *good people* who help out every alien that drops on their doorstep. If push comes to shove, they'll probably do it again. They've totally got this! What do I need to be here for?"

The House said nothing.

"I don't feel *anything*. I'm totally neutral about this. I don't need to care. At all."

The House still said nothing.

"Oh, so *now* you've got nothing to say? Maybe because you finally know I'm right! For once!"

He waited for any kind of a response. Something to soothe the frantic ache in his chest. The one growing tighter and tighter with each breath, each look towards the door, each thought of a kid in the woods, completely and totally alone-

"Screw this." Making a last minute decision, Stone jumped off the couch and marched back to the kitchen. "I don't think it counts as being involved if I just… check in with Tom. Ask if they've seen the kid. That's basically nothing. And if I happen to bring them lunch so I can stay around longer, in case a call comes in- that's practically *hands off*. I'm completely out of the way. Totally and completely."

Above him, a speaker scratched to life and began to belt out the first notes to *Love the Way You Lie.*

"Oh *who asked you?"* Stone snapped, before slamming the kitchen door.

When Shadow awoke, the sun was already well above the peaks of the mountains. He stretched his arms out, grunting at the stiffness in his joint, the soreness of his muscles. Then he pushed himself up to sit, which was accompanied by even more grunting.

So.

He was still breathing.

Painfully, but still breathing.

Which meant that he had to try again to get himself out of the circumstances that he'd landed himself in.

It was becoming abundantly clear that he was completely unsuited for the wilderness. He was a failure as a hunter, a gatherer, and, given how much pain shot up his leg when he got to his feet, a healer.

So where did that leave him?

“Up a creek without a paddle.”

He hobbled to the nearest tree, tore off the lowest hanging branch and, using it as a makeshift walking stick, started the long, slow trek back towards civilization.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which Stone brings baked goods to the Sheriff's Office.

Stone didn't know what to expect when he walked into the sheriff's office with tupperware full of namoura and pistachio baklava. A little excessive, maybe, but stress had always brought him back to the kitchen.

He just really hoped they couldn't taste the extra panic drizzled in with the honey.

"Stone!" Tom saw him first from his desk. His casted foot was sticking out to the right and his crutches were leaning on the wall behind him. "I didn't expect you here today!"

"I didn't expect to come here today." He lifted the tupperware. "I baked."

Tom's eyes lit up. "Oh, you're kidding me. You *bake* too?" He propped himself up on the desk to try and get up, and Stone had to sweep in to put the boxes in front of the man to make sure he didn't break a second leg in the name of sugar. "Maddie is going to be so jealous."

"I made enough," said Stone, popping both lids. "You should have enough to take home to the family."

Tom plucked a slice of namoura between his thumb and pointer finger. "That's so sweet you think there'll be leftovers." He popped it into his mouth. "These are all for me. None of these schmucks are getting anything."

Stone turned towards the direction of said *schmucks*.

There was another desk across the way from him. WHIPPLE was written on a little name plate, but the person sitting there was definitely not *Whipple*.

Stone paused, tilting his head to look down at the sulking, blue hedgehog currently busy sorting through folders. "I thought you were with your mom…?"

Sonic glared up at Stone.

"Oh, 'eah," Tom said between bites of cake. "He's currently working off a sentence for bad behavior."

Stone turned back to Sonic. "Do I want to ask?"

Sonic did open his mouth but didn't get a chance to say much before Tom interrupted with, "No talking to the prisoner."

Sonic muttered something under his breath and in a blink the folders were all in a neat pile and the hedgehog was sulking against the chair, arms crossed. "This is *Knuckles'* job," the middle Wachowski griped. "He was supposed to be helping you out while *I* played with kittens."

"Yeah, well, Knuckles is busy."

Sonic flapped his arms towards the other side of the room. "He's texting *Zoe!"*

Stone hadn't even noticed the eldest Wachowski when he walked in, but finally got a look at Knuckles from where he was slouched down on the office couch, face practically planted against his phone screen.

Tom plucked another piece of cake from the box. "You have your orders," he said. "I've got to talk to Stone, so go grab my laptop from my bag and start researching!"

Stone sat in the chair across from Tom's desk. "Start… researching?"

"I'll tell you later." Tom took another bite of cake and wiped his hands off onto his work pants. "So. Not that I don't love spontaneous cake visits-"

"Maddie told me about the BOLO." Tom startled with how fast Stone dropped that little gem. Stone did his best to try and settle, going for cool, calm, and collected. "I mean, I just figured- she told me and I thought I could, yunno. Lend a hand or something."

What was the opposite of nailing it?

Cool, calm, and collected was sounding a whole lot like desperate, distressed, and distraught.

Tom, thankfully, seemed to understand. He put the tops back onto the Tupperware. "If you want updates, I'm happy to give them to you."

Stone let out a breath. "Yeah," he breathed, before adding; "Not that I'm worried or anything. Because I'm not."

"Oh yeah, I can see that. Picture of perfect tranquility, you."

"Funny."

"I do try." Tom sat up when a phone somewhere in the back began to ring. He scanned his desk before cursing under his breath. He struggled up to his feet, waving off Stone's offer of a hand to help and grabbing his crutches. "Wade's out getting lunch. Must've left his phone in the back, and I want to check just in case it's… yunno."

Stone watched him hobble off and heard his muffled voice when he answered the phone. With nothing to do he scanned the office, gaze lingering on Knuckles (who was busy

chuckling at something on his phone screen, large gloves somehow managing to quickly type an answer back) before roving over towards Sonic.

The middle Wachowski was still glaring at his father's computer screen.

"What's got your quills in a twist?"

Sonic's glare turned to Stone, who raised his hands.

"Just asking."

The glare softened to an exasperated eye roll. "I'm supposed to be making *dinner* ."

"That's fun!"

The glare was back.

"Or… not?"

"It's not supposed to be fun. Apparently my comment this morning on the phone about my parents only being able to feed us *slop* made my mother think she had to torture me."

"Ahhh, so that's what she did after she hung up."

"Yes, and now they're teaching me a lesson about *appreciation* , which means I have to research a stupid recipe and cook a stupid dinner for my entire stupid family, so if you'd please just leave me to my stupid, stupid, stupid *damnation* , I'd appreciate it."

Stone stood up and wandered towards the desk where Sonic was sitting. He leaned over and looked at the screen. "You know," he said, slowly, "there are some really easy recipes out there. Good ones, too. Easier than that, even." He gestured to where the kid had split the screen between an elaborate three course experience and something to do with dino nuggets. "I've got a few recipes under my belt I could help you out with."

Beside him, Sonic stiffened before looking up at Stone. "You'd… help me cook?"

"Sure. Why not." He paused. "I mean, as long as it's okay with your parents."

Sonic grinned. He turned the laptop towards Stone. "Show me?" he asked. And Stone, who had fought Sonic on fields full of rubble and explosions, absolutely folded under the sincerity in those young eyes.

By the time Wade got back to the station, Sonic was tentatively off his probation for good behavior. Apparently having actually gotten excited at the prospect of cooking with Stone was enough for his parents to loosen the noose (Sonic's words) and let him off with a warning and a promise for an upcoming dinner cooked by Chef Sonic and, hopefully, his Sous Chef Stone.

“Yes, Mom,” Sonic said on the phone, sounding just as shamefaced as he looked while he stood next to his father. “No, I know. I’m sorry. Your cooking isn’t… bad.”

Stone heard Maddie’s laugh tinny through the phone. She said something to Sonic and he flushed.

“Yeah. You do… a lot. I know. You *and* Dad. I always know that. I’m grateful, I’m just… yunno. I’ve got a tough guy act. People expect it now.” He listened to something else his mother said before rolling his eyes, nervously looking up at Stone. “Yeah, yeah, *Iloveyoutoo,* okay?” he whispered.

“I ALSO LOVE YOU, MOTHER!” Knuckles shouted from the couch.

“*Jeez*, Knuckles! Tell the whole world why don’t you!”

“I WILL!” Knuckles started to get up from his lounging position.

“Sit down, Knucklehead,” Tom waved a hand at him. “You can tell the world some other time, alright?”

The echidna looked like he was about to protest, but then his phone pinged and immediately distracted him from it.

Tom chuckled. “Never thought I’d say it, but thank god for teenage girls.”

Sonic, who had ended the call with Maddie while his brother was still shouting, made a face. “Gross.” Then he glanced up at Stone. “Dude, you’ve got that look again.”

Stone blinked. “What look?”

“The ‘I can’t believe these guys who can punch people to the moon are just regular kids’ look.”

“I didn’t know that was a specific look.”

“It is,” Tom said. “Trust me, I wore that look for weeks after Sonic first came to live with us. Give it time.”

“Wade also carried that look,” Knuckles muttered, eyes still fixed on his phone. “Understandable. We are awe inspiring to him. How could he not marvel at us?”

Tom grinned up at Stone. “That’s my boy. Humble to the end.”

“He’s not *marvelling* at you, dingus.” Sonic leaned back in his chair to frown at his older brother. “He’s just stunned that in reality you’re just a goober who makes heart-eyes at his phone all day.”

It took a moment for Knuckles to respond, his thumbs somehow making words on the tiny screen even though they barely seemed to move. “Yes, yes,” he said, still not looking up. “Exactly as I said.”

Sonic threw up his hands. “I seriously can’t with this guy.”

Tom popped the top off of one of the tupperware containers and offered the hedgehog a diamond-shaped cake slice. “S’not worth it, bud.”

Sonic plucked a slice of cake and shoved the whole thing in his mouth before grabbing a second. “Mom said since I apologized and I’m gonna cook for everyone with Stone I can go back with her. Apparently they’ve got puppies coming in today, too.”

“Sounds like a blast.”

The second slice of cake was gone in a flash. “Can I take some for Mom and Tails?”

“Are they going to get to Mom and Tails?”

“Father! What do you take me for!” Sonic plucked out three more slices, holding them in a napkin. He faced the front of the sheriff's office but paused, one foot hovering above the ground. He glanced up at Stone. “Thanks for offering to help me, by the way.”

“Oh.” Stone blinked. “Uh. No problem?”

Sonic beamed. “Yunno, for a former evil hench guy, you’re actually really cool.”

“Uh-”

“Seriously. Don’t know *what* Robotnik was thinking. If he’d just gotten down off his insane, power hungry horse, you two could’ve been golden. Had a whole troop of crazy little mad scientist kids or something.”

Stone laughed. “Sorry, I’m just having a hard time picturing it.”

“Really?” Sonic tilted his head, giving Stone a long look. “I mean, whatever you want to do, I guess. But I think you’d make a pretty neat dad.”

And before Stone could digest that morsel, Sonic was gone in barely a flash of light, the papers in the office fluttering as he went.

It took Stone time to realize that Tom was staring at him. Arms crossed, brow raised, the sheriff had a strange kind of smile. It was like he was somehow looking through Stone. Right into the dark, locked up bits of him. “Kids, huh?” Tom said, though the look didn’t budge.

“Yeah,” rasped Stone. “Kids.”

“And speaking of, I’ve got more information on some people around here setting up searches for Shadow. You want to see what they’re looking for? Maybe add in a statement?”

Without much else to do, trying his best to put his focus solely back on Shadow and the fact that he didn’t care beyond that (not at all, totally not, never ever), Stone nodded and sat back in his seat.

It was amazing. That was what Stone realized after he'd sat across from Tom for all of half an hour, reading through the list of contacts who'd already responded to the Sheriff's office's bulletin.

Tom had sent out as good of a description of Shadow as he could muster, using his middle son's measurements as an approximate, somewhat close guess (which got him a haughty *did no one ever teach you to never ask a hedgehog about their size, you rube*) and had shared pictures from Tails' security cameras of Shadow in black and white, curling away from Sonic, the trash bag fallen open behind them.

It was the best they had.

Do not approach, Tom had written in bold font. *Tends to run. Trying to catch will be dangerous for you/him. Please call the sheriff's office to report sightings. -Sherrif Wachowski*

Thankfully, Green Hills seemed happy to roll with what they were given.

"I didn't realize…"

"Yeah. This whole town loves our boys."

"I mean, I knew," said Stone. "When I first got here, some people mentioned them. They made some vague threats when they thought I was here to hurt them and backed off when I said I wasn't. But I didn't realize it was this many."

"Kind of wild, huh?" Tom spun the computer entirely around after opening an email.

I AIN'T SEEN YOUR GRUMPY DEVIL BUT I BET I CAN CATCHM. TELL ME WHAT KIND OF FOOD THOSE WARM TOPIC GOTH TYPES LIKE TO EAT.

Tom snorted and turned the computer around to type back a quick response (Don't approach, Carl. And it's Hot Topic.). "They'll do their best. They really will."

"It also helps that we're a small town without a lot to do." Wade joined the conversation without looking towards Stone or Tom, currently wrist deep in the Tupperware, fishing for the best piece of baklava he could find. "A BOLO is the most exciting thing most people have going on in their day. And honestly, with Thanksgiving coming up, I'm sure people will do anything to avoid spending time with their racist grandparents or overbearing second aunts three times removed."

"He's not wrong," Tom agreed. "People actually listen to the police scanners for *gossip.*"

Stone looked between them. "Is there lots of gossip on police scanners?"

"You kidding me."

Wade finally found a piece he liked and gnawed happily on the pastry. "Crime here isn't exactly Ocean's 8. Last week Mr. Grimes - he owns the hardware store - called because Mary Lou Green apparently stole his family's secret hotdish recipe and I had to stop him from egging her house."

“The Casserole Case was the talk of the town.” Tom sighed wistfully. “Never did get her to admit to the theft.”

Stone looked between them. “You’re messing with me.”

“Nope.” Wade shook his head. “The beef runs deep in a town this small. Tom and I once had to break up an all out MMA fight at a bake off in downtown Green Hills. Two 80 year old women were beating each other over the head with lawn chairs for a blue ribbon. The entire old folks home was circled up and chanting *fight fight fight* by the time we got there.”

Tom’s gaze had gone somewhere far off, like a grizzled veteran recounting an old war story. “I couldn’t even confiscate weapons, Stone, because the town would’ve lost it if they saw me taking away canes. I saw two old men smacking each other with walkers and that was before I pulled over a *scooter*.”

“The ground was littered in dentures,” Wane whispered. “And the lost-and-found was insane.”

“So yes,” Tom said, before Wade could go farther down his denture filled rabbit hole. “This town absolutely treats our scanners like gossip, and we’ve been flooded with calls volunteering to help. No bites yet, but the rangers distributed pictures. So did the retirement home. Apparently they go bird watching twice a week and added him to the roster? So hopefully some old man’ll catch a glimpse of him after he sees a mountain bluebird or two.” Tom pushed his computer towards Stone, letting him browse through the responses.

Stone shook his head. He tried to find the words, but couldn’t seem to grasp any. “This is just-” he said. “It’s so-”

Tom’s smile was soft. “Yeah,” he said. “It really is.” His eyes stayed fixed on Stone; curious and thoughtful. Not that Stone noticed, too busy reading through each of the helpful responses and suggestions. “You know, Maddie gave me your phone number, right? So if we do get any hits, if you want, I can give you a call?”

That got Stone’s attention. He finally lifted his eyes from the screen. They were so openly hopeful. “Really? That would be- Tom, that would be *incredible*.”

“Sure. I’ll give Wade your information too, and the boys know to alert you if anything happens. Right Knuckles?”

“What?” said Knuckles, face still pressed to his phone screen.

Tom rolled his eyes. “You get the picture.”

It was a weight off his shoulders, to be sure. The town of Green Hills had been a thorn in his side for so long, but Stone was quickly realizing that the thorn was made up of nothing more than stories and myths he and Robotnick had fashioned together. It made hating Sonic a little easier; Frankensteining the place he came from by shoving chunks of lies and truths into a midwest monster.

It was with no small amount of guilt that he realized he'd thought so little of the people he'd grouped together and labeled as nothing more than small minded hicks.

These were good people. Good people who wanted to help and who cared about the same people that Stone-

Well. No. Not that Stone *cared*.

But *they* cared, Stone thought.

They cared so much that it must have hurt. And *they* worried until they felt sick, and hoped that the hedgehog out there in the woods knew that so many people wanted him safe and found.

Yes, Stone thought. *They* cared. A whole lot more than they meant to, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

"What can I do?" he asked Tom. "I want to help, if I can."

"Honestly? Go home. That's the best way you can help." When Stone only lifted a brow, Tom shook his head and elaborated. "I've been in this business a while, and what people don't realize is that most people instinctively go back to somewhere familiar to them. If it's safe enough, people usually go back. So as much as I'm glad we've got all of *this* out there…" he gestured towards the desk, from his computer to Wade, who was filing reports as they spoke, "the chances are actually really good he'll wind up at mine or yours."

"How good?"

"Good enough," said Tom.

Wade hummed. "With any luck, he'll wander close enough for you to talk him down. Best thing you can do is be on the property so he doesn't talk himself out of walking away before you can get back."

It felt like enough of an anchor to let Stone relax, if even by a fraction. "Alright. Yeah. Back to the house. I can go back to the house." He looked at Tom's desk. "You can keep the cookies, by the way."

"Oh, I wasn't giving them back," said Tom with a grin. "I was about ready to log them as evidence and confiscate them if you tried to take'm away. But thank you for offering. Makes it much easier."

It felt amazing to laugh again. And not for the first time that week, Stone found himself grateful that he knew the Wachowskis. Weird ex-villain history and all.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which Shadow cannot escape Sonic and his family, no matter how hard he tries.

Shadow didn't make it as far as town, but he hadn't expected to. Instead, as the sun was setting, he stumbled upon a fenced in pasture occupied by a handful of horses.

He'd never seen them outside the little black and white television set Maria'd had, and he was taken aback at their size. He watched them from the treeline, feeling certain they'd sense him and spook. But if they did notice him, they didn't care, and they continued to graze unhurriedly. One of them *did* take notice and trotted up, almost excited, until it got a better look at him and huffed, turning around. He watched it go, staring at the field of horses until a long, clear whistle rang out, catching all of their attention.

The horses all began moving in the direction of the sound and, following quietly along, Shadow saw a large barn at the far end of the field. Red with the storybook white trim, huge double doors open wide to welcome them in for the night. There was a yellow glow from inside and he almost moved to follow right then and there.

He stopped himself. Made himself wait until the horses were rounded up and the silhouetted human who'd called them had shut the big doors and gone back to the house further still along the horizon. Then, and only then, did he let himself move again.

The sun was all but sunk by the time he approached the building. The doors were barred but not locked, and it only took a little effort to heft the beam and squeeze inside as quietly as he could.

The smell was overwhelming and he almost backed right out again, but his clenching stomach reminded him why he was there, and he forged on ahead.

The animals had to eat, and more than just the grass out in the field. It might not be the most appetising meal in the world, but at least he could be certain it wouldn't make him sick. He could hear the horses snorting in curiosity as he inched alongside their pens. One bumped its body against the door, rattling it and startling him, but he managed not to spark.

There was a hum though from somewhere farther behind him. He passed slowly by more of the horse pens, a few of them gazing over the stall doors at him, eyeing him skeptically.

It was a fridge. Plugged into one of the only outlets in the wall. It was almost empty when he cracked it open, but the sight of three plastic fruit cups sitting alone on the top shelf were almost enough to make him cry.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he murmured.

His hands were shaking as he fought with the cellophane lid (Why was *everything* plastic now? What was wrong with pop-top cans?), and syrup spilled over his fingers as it finally came away. But it smelled as good as he remembered, and he was salivating as he lifted it to his lips.

Then the overhead lights flipped on.

He jumped, and the little cup tumbled from his hand onto the sawdust-covered floor. He bit back the pitiful sound that wanted to come out, but not as well as he should have because then there were footsteps and a figure appeared in his peripheral vision.

He slowly turned.

The man standing before him was tall, and gray, and looked like he’d stepped right out of an episode of *Rawhide* . He looked down at Shadow over a thick mustache and raised one equally-thick eyebrow.

Shadow swallowed.

The mustache moved and the voice that emerged was deep, and strong, and warm.

“Put those in there for the grandkids,” he said. “They’re comin’ by tomorrow and the middle one’s so picky he won’t eat what his grandma cans in the summer. Not particularly fond of the plastic kind m’self, but he won’t hear nothin’ of it.” His eyes roved over Shadow again. From the top of his head, down past dirty, blood crusted patchy fur, past that to his swollen ankle.

And then, to Shadow’s shock, the man took a step backwards.

“But we got plenty more in the house,” he said.

Another step back, and another. One final step and he was at the door. He put a hand on the switch just next to the frame.

“You just help yourself, son.”

He flipped the switch, the only light coming from the panels above.

“And if you look in that last stall? Down there?” The man gestured all the way past where Shadow stood, even if Shadow refused to turn around, to look away. “There’s some fresh blankets we keep for the horses. Just washed. Won’t smell like they do. My grandkids like to nap in here when we ain’t lookin’ to get out’a chores. Don’t think they’d mind sharing.”

Then he slipped out the door.

Bewildered, Shadow leaned against the closed refrigerator door.

He took a minute, waiting to see if perhaps the man would spring back in with a net or a tranq gun, screaming *gotcha*, but when nothing happened he took a chance and opened the fridge door again.

He took his prize down to the last stall the man had pointed towards. The door was already cracked open, and true to his word there were clean blankets; three folded and one larger spread out across the stall floor.

They were soft and smelled like cotton and hay and he curled one around his shoulders while he ate his prize slowly and licked syrup off his fingers.

It was dark and cool, with only the whinnys of the horses around him, and he'd just begun to very nearly relax when the barn door opened again.

"S'just me." It was the deep-voiced man from somewhere far off. "Not sure if you're still around or if you took my advice and found the nappin' stall." Shadow used his good foot to push away until he was pressed into the corner of the stall, huddled in the blankets. He held his breath to stay as still and quiet as possible.

"M'wife wanted to bring you somethin'. She's cookin' up a storm for our grandkids. There's always extra. She's kind, but she's a whirlwind of a strong woman, and I wasn't sure if whirlwind would be best for you right now."

His voice was still strong and still slow as he moved through the barn, and it took Shadow a moment to realize that the man was talking to let Shadow know where he was.

"In case you're hankerin' for somethin' more'n peaches," he said, close enough to be just outside the stall, "I'm leaving you a plate here. Some water too, and a bag of frozen peas I dug out of the back of the freezer. S'pot roast. A slice of apple pie, because lord knows the woman couldn't let you go without. Not sure what kind'a day you've had, but a slice of pie can make things a little better, I think." There was the sound of clinking outside the door. "I'll just leave it here," he said again, voice drifting off. "G'night. And rest that foot, y'hear me? The peas are too old to be any good for eatin', but they'll do in a pinch until you can get someone to take a look at you."

There were a few shuffling steps after that and then the barn door was closing again.

When Shadow did manage to crawl carefully forward and peek through the door, there was a tray waiting for him. He pulled it one-handed back to the corner of the stall with him.

There really was pot roast, the smell of which he clocked immediately (at least something survived from 50 years ago), and mashed potatoes, and some sort of greens, and a slice of seeded bread. He stretched out his leg, slipping the bag of peas underneath his ankle.

There were even utensils.

The man had given him a knife.

A relatively dull one, but the point remained.

He'd never been allowed to have a knife, no matter how blunted, back at the base.

Never a fully-tined fork either. He'd eaten every meal with a spork that he'd loathed. Even Maria coloring hers to resemble his face and quills hadn't brought him around on them.

'It's utilitarian,' they'd assured him.

It couldn't have been that they didn't trust him with sharp objects.

As if he, himself, wasn't one big, walking, talking sharp object.

The memory almost soured his stomach, but thankfully, the pot roast tasted just as good as it smelled and he quickly forgot his brooding.

And even if he'd wanted to brood, he couldn't have done it well. The man had been right. Pie really did make things just a little bit better.

"You're sure I can't just go out and check on him?"

"Yes, Rosie."

"I could be in and out, real quick."

"No, Rosie."

Rosie clucked her tongue and looked out the window from where she sat upright in their bed, curlers in her hair, book open and unread in her lap. "Poor thing probably hasn't had a good bath in a while, and maybe he wants another slice of pie."

Her husband climbed into bed beside her, smelling like mouthwash. "Kid looks like he's been run over by a bad day, Rosie. Leave'm be."

"And he looked like our grandbabies?"

"Like our first one more than the other two, but yeah. Looked just like'm."

"I wonder if they know…" She looked towards the bedside table where her phone was charging besides the old landline Tom and Maddie had finally convinced them to give up. "Maybe we should give them a call?"

"S'late." He picked up the newspaper and flipped to the crossword he'd started on the day before and never finished. "Sides, if we call now the kids'll want to talk to us and Maddie and our boy will be out for blood if we get'em bouncing off the walls."

Rosie rolled her eyes but did at least settle back into the pillows. Her eyes stayed fixed on the window though, nails tapping away on the open book. "I'm makin' him a full breakfast tomorrow before the kids get here," she declared. "Don't try to stop me, Thomas. A *full* breakfast. Fried tomatoes and all."

“I know better than to get between you and a goal,” he said, and filled in four across [to be cared for]; NURTURED.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which a Shadow is found again and again.

True to her word, Rosie was up before the crack of dawn, scrambling eggs, biscuits in the oven, tomatoes sizzling on the cast iron. Big T made himself as useful as he could be when his wife was on a rampage. He brewed them both cups of coffee but was shooed out before he could steal a piece of bacon.

She'd even pushed through her staunch cooking rituals (Sonic had tested her to be sure when he'd first come into their lives) and had turkey bacon waiting on the counter. Mostly because Tails had seen pictures of pigs and decided he was refusing on principle to eat anything with a tail that wagged.

"I've got about three batches of pancakes to make before they get here, so you can take that out to him." She waved the spatula at a plate on a spare tray.

"You made'm eggs and biscuits, Rosie. I don't think the boys need pancakes, too," he said, but quickly shut his mouth when she gave him a warning look. And he absolutely didn't say anything about the second slice of pie sitting between the plate and the mug of lemon tea.

"Just let me finish so I can spoil my grand babies. And let me know how he's looking! Madeline's dropping the kids off, so we can have her take a look at him if you can bribe him in here. Tell him there's more pie!"

"I'll be sure to do that," he said as he exited the kitchen through the back door, tray in both hands.

"S'me again," he announced as he ambled into the barn. The only greeting he got was the impatient whinny of horses wanting to stretch their legs. But he thought he heard a stifled grunt from the corner stall that wasn't particularly equine. "Got more grub." The tray from the night before was sitting outside the stall door, the utensils placed neatly on the licked-clean plate. He couldn't help but smile. "You're a right polite guest, son." He placed the full tray down and picked up the empty one. "Well, enjoy."

He turned to walk away when, from behind the door came, "...Why are you being so kind to me?"

The voice was deep, a little rough, but Big T knew well enough not to judge an alien by how they sounded. He answered with a question of his own. "How old are you?"

A beat, and then, “Seventy-five?"

He snorted a laugh at that. “Alright, fine, don’t tell me. I only ask, ‘cause you remind me of someone I know. Someone I care an awful lot about, and he turned fifteen not too long ago. You sound his age, yunno that? An’ even though in my grandaddy’s day fifteen meant you were a man, I think it’s not nearly grown enough to be out on your own.” He shifted, facing the closed door directly. “Now, I can’t make you come back into the house with me, but I can’t say I don’t wish you would. In any case, better eat up before your eggs get cold.”

Then he turned and strode away, setting the old tray by the front doors and busying himself with letting the horses out into the pasture. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a white-gloved hand pulling the breakfast tray into the far stall.

“Grandma Rosie!” Sonic was out of the car first when Maddie parked out front, dust still settling from where she’d driven down the dirt road. “Grandpa T!”

“Well hello there, darling!” Rosie snatched Sonic from the ground as he ran towards her, tugging him into a hug, leaving lipstick smears on his fur from one or two loud kisses.

“Grandmother. Grandfather.” Knuckles was next to lumber out. “I am happy to be in your presence once more.”

“And we’re happy to have you here, sweet thing!”

Sonic leaned back, catching himself on his hands, feet above his head. He walked on his hands in a circle until he could look at his grandmother upside down. “Grandma, not to be presumptuous-”

“Well ain’t that a three dollar word.”

“-but I think we were promised *pie* at some point.”

“Sonic.” Maddie sighed.

“What!” He flipped himself right side again, stumbling but managing to find his footing. “We *were!”*

“Oh, it’s fine, Madeline. And I sure did. S’waiting for us inside.”

Big T snorted, kneeling down. “I’d like to actually get a hug out of my grandkids at some point today.” Sonic zipped into his arms without further prompting.

Maddie had called Rosie and Big T alongside her husband just days ago, tentatively asking if they’d be willing to watch the kids for a two day, one night gig while she got in some extra cleaning and caught a nap or two. Tom’s injury slowed him down and even *he* was frustrated with how little he could contribute, as much as she told him that it was fine, and he’d help again when he was better.

I hate watching you take on too much , he'd explained while she'd helped him wrap his cast in plastic before a shower.

It was his idea in the end to call his parents. Who were more than enthusiastic to step in.

And the kids were more than enthusiastic to be there.

"Can Mom stay for breakfast, too?"

"It's more like brunch now," Maddie mumbled, looking down at her watch.

"It's *ten* ," argued Sonic.

"You're more than welcome to stay, Madeline. We've got plenty."

"More than enough for the whole motley crew." Big T rose back to his full height again, Sonic hanging off of his arm for the ride. "Speakin' of, ain't we short one?"

They all pivoted their gazes back to the minivan, where, through the still-open side door, they could see Tails still in his carseat, hunched over something in his lap.

Rosie put a hand above her eyes and squinted in the sunlight. "Tails, baby! What are you still doin' in there? I'm missing out on hugs, and two out'a three ain't enough!"

Instead of answering, Tails pulled a screwdriver from his backpack and put it to whatever was in his hands , murmuring something to himself under his breath .

She tilted her head. "He alright?" she asked Maddie. "He ain't usually this… serious."

Maddie shrugged. "Nah, this is normal. He's got two modes, that kid. Either he's rainbows incarnate or he's on the cusp of a Pulitzer and forgets we exist. Today it's his new project. Said it was acting up this morning and he's been tinkering with it the whole drive here. Lemme see if I can snap him out of it." She cupped a hand by her mouth and called, "We're *here!*"

The fox kit looked up, glancing around as if noticing for the first time that the car had stopped moving. Then he realized he had the whole family's eyes on him and he waved sheepishly. With a bit of effort, he unbuckled and climbed out of the car, still holding what looked to his grandparents like the sort of handheld video game Tommy had played back in the 80s. "Sorry!" he said as he trotted over to hug Rosie's legs. "Hi!"

"Hiya, sweet thing." She dipped down and plucked him up. "What genius new contraption's got you so occupied this time?"

"It's my Shadow Tracker." He held it out so she could see it better. He'd *borrowed* an old Raspberry Pi from a box in Tom's closet to make the little machine. Repurposed with a yellow case, buttons torn out and replaced with knobs, it was nothing short of a tiny marvel. The screen displayed what looked like a topographical map of the town and the surrounding mountains. In a low spot that looked familiar, a little yellow dot and blinking.

“You chasin’ shadows now instead a’ robots?”

“Only one particular Shadow, Grandmother,” Knuckles said. “One who has eluded us thus far.”

“It’s not a *literal* shadow,” Tails clarified. “It’s the name of this new hedgehog we met on our last mission!”

Big T’s head turned, and he gently lowered Sonic to the ground so he could stand closer to Rosie. “New hedgehog y’say?”

“Mhm.” Tails frowned down at the screen, adjusting one of the knobs, zooming in on the map. The dot didn’t move. “He got hurt. I mean, we all did, but he doesn’t have anyone. So we’ve been trying to find him, but he’s… not listening.”

“So how’d you manage to get a tracker on him?”

“That was sort of an accident.” Sonic had the good sense to look at least a little guilty. “I mean, not that it’s a *bad* thing, but I grabbed this kinda techno-magic cuff off his wrist. So Tails figured we could use it to track him-”

“-but,” Tails said, giving the screen in front of him a few frustrated taps, “it’s not doing what it’s supposed to do.”

Big T tilted his head. “It ain’t?”

“ *No* . He’s been trying to stay as far away from us as possible. We were going to take this thing out into the woods, but it’s saying that he’s near *here* .”

“Yeah, no way.” Sonic snorted, leaning back against his mother’s legs. “I want to find the guy as much as anyone here, and I know he’s having a hard time out there, but I mean… he made it clear he doesn’t want anything to do with us. Running into us once, I get. Twice, sure. But more than that?” Sonic scoffed. “Even I don’t think his luck is that bad.”

Big T’s mustache twitched. “You’d be surprised how bad one fella’s luck can be, kid. Because I’ve got a hedgehog who’s in awfully rough shape hiding out in my barn right now.”

Tails nearly dropped the suped-up Gameboy. “Hold on- *what?”*

“Yeah. Little guy. Looked a lot like Sonic. Only more… what’s that phase Tom went through, Rosie? In middle school? Gotham?”

“No, that’s Superman. Or that Green Flashlight fella,” said Rosie. “I think it’s emu.”

“That’s the big bird-”

Rosie flapped her hands. “It don’t matter. What *does* matter is that your Grandpa found him taking food out of the fridge. Poor dear looked hurt and tired. Hopefully he got a good night’s rest, and I know from the empty plate that he’s at least appreciated my cooking.”

The looks of confusion had morphed as she spoke to something more akin to disbelief intermingled with hope, though Sonic's was by far the most hopeful. He dropped to the ground, tugging on his grandfather's hand. "Did he really look like me?? What color was he?"

Knuckles raised an eyebrow. "Are there *more* hedgehogs of various colors you have not told us about, brother?"

"I can't believe it!" Tails lifted his machine up to his face, beaming. "It worked. It *really* worked." He showed it to Sonic and jammed his finger against the screen. "And *that's him* . Right there. He's still in the barn. It's *him* , Sonic!"

"I just wanna be sure!" Sonic flapped a hand at his brothers. "Maybe it was dark and it was really just a badger or something."

Big T chuckled. "Definitely never met a badger who wore gloves and could talk." He turned to Maddie. " Figured you'd want to take a look at him."

She clucked her tongue. "I *do* ." She looked past Big T at the barn. "If he even lets me get close. Seems to be kind of… skittish around doctors."

"And most other things," Sonic added sagely. "Basically everything."

"Yeah, I picked up on that."

"How you managed to get close to him…" Maddie shook her head.

Big T shrugged. "I dunno. This one was pretty skittish the first time he met us, but it worked out just fine in the end." He jerked a thumb down towards Sonic, who let out a string of offended noises and a half-hearted *was not* under his breath. "And half the horses were like that too, but they're alright now."

"You're so *zen* , Grandpa," said Tails in awe.

Big T's mustache quivered. "Yeah," he gruffed. "That's me. Zen."

"Well," Maddie took a breath and straightened up. "Maybe he's calmed down enough to at least talk to us." And she began walking carefully towards the barn, her kids and inlaws trailing behind.

The creaking from the barn door had Shadow's ears twitching. The plates from breakfast were sitting outside the stall, and he listened closely, waiting for the deep-voiced man to come through. Probably to collect them.

This time though he stood up and hobbled towards the stall door. After a night's sleep and two full meals it felt almost wrong to not at least peek out.

"Kid?"

It was the man. Though this time he sounded… strained. Much more careful than before.

“S’me. You still there?”

Shadow froze before rapping his knuckles against the wall of the pen, hoping it was enough.

It was.

“Good. M’glad. Well. While I got you here… I brought someone along to take a look at you. My daughter-in-law. Real nice lady.”

Just that was enough to turn him cold. He dragged in a breath and then another.

“She says she knows you?”

Then another voice joined. “Shadow? Sweetheart?”

It was getting hard to breathe, and the stall was suddenly too small, too narrow, too *much* .

“We met the other day for a second, so I don’t know if you remember me. But I’m Maddie Wachowski. I’m Sonic’s mom? You know Sonic, right?”

He knew Sonic. He also knew Sonic’s father from when he’d been on the ground, bones cracked and bruised with G.U.N. swarming in. Knew tiny cells and cages and cold eyes. Knew people in white coats with needles and cold, clinical eyes.

And he didn’t want to have to know any of *that* any longer.

“ *You sold me out!”* He didn’t mean to speak. He barely knew he had until the words had already fallen out around him. “You gave me up to *them!”*

“Now hold on a minute-”

There was a flash, a spark, a pull that came from deep in him, and Shadow tumbled onto the floor in the center of the barn. He breathed in deep and ragged and stumbled up to his feet. He had to calm down. He knew he had to calm down.

But when he tried to think of how, he was met with a fog that was swallowing him up and clogging his lungs.

The woman was creeping slowly towards him, wide eyed. “Shadow…” She raised both her hands, palms out. “You’re panicking. You have to breathe.”

He could feel the chaos energy building up in his muscles, feel it crackling along his fur. “Don’t touch me!”

She stopped then, kneeling in the dirt a few feet away, hands still up. “I’m not going to. But you have to breathe, ok?”

She was right, and he hated that she was right, and he hated even more that he couldn't seem to do it. He was sucking in air but his lungs refused to accept it. Every muscle was tense, every nerve alight, and the pull from inside was growing again. He shut his eyes-

'He's out of control!'

'Restrain him!'

As the voices filled his head he felt the phantom noose of the catchpole cinch around his throat. Around his wrists.

"I won't go back!" The words were a roar, propelled by a wave of energy that had both humans staggering. The woman let out a cry of surprise that had him opening his eyes again, saw her on the floor, and his stomach dropped. "No. No, no I didn't want to hurt anyone! I didn't mean to! " The energy surged again, but this time he held it in, felt it sear his limbs. And when he felt the pull again- even as he watched the woman try to move toward him once more- he let it take him.

"Dammit!" Maddie stared mournfully at the charred hay on the barn floor, speckled in small clumps of fur. They were shiny with blood.

Big T dipped to put a hand on her shoulder. "Was worried that might happen. Well, not the vanishing-into-thin-air bit, that was a surprise. What in the hell's that kid been through that he'd react like that?"

Maddie stood, brushing dirt from her jeans. "I don't know the whole story. Sonic knows some. I think he was an experiment of some kind? Or held by G.U.N. at least."

The old cowboy whistled low. "Well, shoot, if I'd known that I would've come at him from a different angle. One night of Rosie's cookin' is good, but it can't work miracles."

Maddie shook her head. "It's my fault. I was so anxious about finally getting him, I rushed into it. And now he's gone who-knows-where. Depending on how far, Tails might not even be able to find him with his tracker. " She blew out an exasperated breath. " *And* I've gotta go tell the boys he's gone. Again."

When Shadow tumbled to the ground, he stayed on his back. It was too much effort, getting up to see where he was. So he stayed lying down, staring at the sky through the treetops. The sun was blinding and he squinted towards the clear blue. His breathing was still ragged, and his skin tingled. Parts of his arm felt cold, and when a breeze shifted by it blew right against his skin.

He lifted his arm up to inspect it (a feat; it weighed more than he remembered) and saw the patchy spots where his fur had been seared off. "Ow," he said, too tired for any other reaction, and let his arm flop back down.

Somewhere off in the distance, he heard the sound of footsteps on gravel . He should get up. He *needed* to get up.

With a snarl, he heaved himself into a sitting position and tightened his fists. He had some fight in him. Enough to keep surviving. Enough to deal with whatever new nuisance had decided to tear his life into teeny tiny bits.

“Shadow?”

Shadow opened his mouth. He closed it. He opened it again. “Seriously?” he said (whinged, really, but he’d deny it tooth and nail), and flopped stubbornly back down into the garden.

Eventually the sun was blocked out and he glared up at the face of Stone standing over him. “Should I say ‘welcome back’?”

Shadow used some of his last energy reserves to grab a clump of garden dirt and throw it at Stone’s stupid face.

Chapter 14

It wasn't exactly Stone's ideal day. He'd actually been having an alright one for his standards. A little lonely, yeah. But he'd disabled some of the traps outside and felt like a quiet morning was a good reward. So he'd enjoyed it, lounging on the front porch with a cup of coffee at his elbow. Outside was better than inside, he'd decided, where the loneliness was cloying.

He'd found a book on a shelf in the attic and had brought it with him. Some kind of a romance with an old painted cover. There were two men on the front. They were on a pirate ship. One of them was wearing an open shirt and had what he assumed was a twelve pack. It was all so historically incorrect, and he should have been bothered, but by page 37 when Fernando accidentally tripped over a treasure chest face first into Diego (somewhere between abs 2 and 4) he forgot to care much.

And then his morning was interrupted by a hedgehog popping out of the ether and throwing dirt in his face.

All around rude.

And now, peace and quiet long gone, Stone found himself sitting on one end of the front porch with Shadow sitting on the other.

"Listen." The silence was palpable, and Stone felt it break when he spoke, carefully getting to his feet. "I'm just going to go inside-"

"*Sit down."*

Stone sat back down.

"I *told* you-"

"I know, I *know*." Stone scrubbed his face. "No sudden moves, hands where you can see them-"

"And no going-"

"No going inside alone."

Shadow humphed. He'd limped his way onto the porch without any help from Stone and had all but collapsed when he'd found a corner of the porch to call his own. And once he'd settled, he'd begun laying out rules with a fire in his eyes that Stone knew would probably end up hurting them both more than he would have liked.

So instead, Stone smoothed his jacket, and picked up his book again. As he cracked the spine, he looked out over the porch again. "Unless you had any objections?"

The boy snorted, muzzle crinkling.

“Because if you were hungry or something, I could-”

“Just stay *put*,” Shadow growled. “I need to *think*.”

“Yup, yup, you got it.” He looked down at the pages without reading the words. It was hard to focus on anything but the issue at hand.

He could only peek in spurts, but what he did see wasn’t good. Shadow was slumped forward in a crude attempt at staying upright. His chest rose and fell erratically in wheezy little breaths. Eyes glassy, hands shaking, Shadow was fighting through the beginnings of something Stone didn’t want to think about alone. He could only imagine what Maddie would say and wished he’d had the foresight to bring his phone with him outside. But it was still in the kitchen on the counter right beside the blender.

“You don’t look too good,” he said slowly.

Shadow snarled. “I look fine.”

“You sure? Maybe I can just-”

“*Don’t move.*”

“Even some water? I can just get you some *water*-”

A warning crackle hit the porch floor besides Stone and left a smoky mark. Shadow’s hands would have spiked the Richter Scale. “I said,” he hissed, “don’t move.”

Stone laid the book in his lap with a soft *thwip*. “Why are you here?”

The question surprised him enough to loosen the scowl on Shadow’s face. “What?”

“You certainly aren’t happy to see me.” Stone raised a hand and shook some lingering dirt from his hair. “So why’d you come back at all?”

Shadow mumbled something into the fur of his folded arms.

“Come again?”

“I didn’t mean to,” he snapped. “I can’t- I can’t control it.”

Stone’s eyes widened. “The inhibitor,” he murmured.

Shadow was eyeing him warily. “How’d’you know about-”

“My- Ivo- The Doctor-” Stone tripped over the words, trying not to let himself get waylaid by how they hurt to say. “He downloaded all of Gerald’s files. I’m a fast reader. I noticed it was missing the other night. I knew it had to be making things difficult, but I didn’t realize-”

“They have it.”

Stone almost said ‘yeah, of course they do’ but then realized that it might get another errant spark sent his way. Instead he asked, “Who?”

“The blue one. His… family.”

“The Wachowskis.”

Shadow nodded.

“Why not just go ask for it back?”

“They won’t give it up so easily.”

“How do you know?”

Shadow’s spine curled. “I hurt them.”

Stone laid the book aside. Folded his hands between his knees. “Yeah, been there.” When the hedgehog stayed silent, he continued. “Funny thing about the hero types, though. They’ve got these silly ideas about second chances.”

He got a grunt in response.

“And, sure, it makes the double-cross that much easier, but at some point, that stops being fun, yunno?”

“And what if *they’re* the ones gearing up for one?”

“One what?”

“Double-cross.”

Stone couldn’t help it, he actually snorted. “Yeah right.”

“They were wearing G.U.N. uniforms. They were *at* G.U.N. H.Q.” The crackling red static was dotting across his quills, and he hugged himself tighter.

“Yeah, because they were trying to keep Gerald from getting the key to the Cannon. Because, I dunno, saving the world is their whole brand?”

“When the Professor freed me, G.U.N. called on *them* to subdue me!” The static gathered into a single spark that skipped across the porch.

Stone drew his feet up and let it scorch the wood beneath him. “I admit, it’s a bad look, yeah.”

“I *won’t* go back in stasis! I *won’t!*”

More sparks rained down.

Stone didn't have much of a response for that beyond watching the sparks calm to a flutter around the hurt, scared kid on his porch. Shadow mirrored Stone and drew up his knees, arms wrapped around them, and rested his chin atop. He sniffled. "I won't," he said again, softer.

"Okay," said Stone.

"I'm tired of cages. No one's putting me anywhere."

Stone nodded. "Okay," he said again. "But… I don't think they want to."

"You don't know that." Shadow wiped his nose with the back of his wrist and winced.

"You're right," said Stone. "I just- I'm just going with my gut here, kiddo. It's not easy for me to trust people either, but sometimes you have to just. Push that feeling down. Tell it to stay quiet."

"It isn't that easy."

"I never said it was."

Shadow looked back up at Stone. His eyes were still glazed and tired. And sad. "No one trusts *me*. G.U.N locked me up and doctors did experiments and they put me into stasis and they did it because they'd never, ever trust *me*."

Stone swallowed. "I'm sorry."

Shadow shrugged. "People can't let their guard down around weapons."

"You're not-"

There was another spark, but this time it fizzled out fast. Shadow's face was strained. "You don't have to be nice," he muttered. "I know what I-" He wiped his face again. "Weapons are just- they're just things that can hurt people. You can't trust them. And you can't *help* them. You just. Lock them up. Keep other people safe *from* them."

"Shadow…"

"No one helps *me*. No one keeps *me* safe."

Stone opened his mouth but found that he didn't know what to say.

Instead he sat and watched the child who was looking out towards the forest, listening to birdsong and watching the garden rustle in the breeze.

"This sucks."

"I'll admit, your form leaves a bit to be desired, but overall, I think you handle Master Biscuit quite well."

Sonic tugged on the reins of his favorite horse, encouraging him back to the start of the small course Big T had set up for their visit. “Gee, thanks. But that’s not what I meant.”

From his perch atop the pasture fence, Tails said, “I know you’re disappointed about Shadow. But Mom did everything she could. If we’d all gone racing into the barn, he probably would’ve taken off even faster.”

“Indeed. He seems not to desire our company.” Standing on the bottom rung, arms draped across the top, Knuckles frowned. “I thought you and he had reached an understanding, up on the moon. Is this not the case, brother?”

“I mean, *sure*. But that’s not the point!”

“Alright,” said Knuckles. He was wearing his stetson, taking it off to fan himself; a habit he’d picked up from watching his grandfather. “So the point was that you landed on the moon after a tantrum.”

“*No*.” Sonic turned Biscuit around and began going the other way, slowing down until he was in front of his eldest brother.

“Fine, you had a grief-induced bout of all-consuming rage that landed you on the moon,” Knuckles put the hat firmly back on his head. “But this allowed you to understand him better, did it not? Because he was battling the very same demons within himself, correct?”

“Wow, Knuckles,” Tails blinked. “That’s really, uh, eloquently put.”

“My time with Healer Alice has expanded my vocabulary, yes.” He nodded sagely, and then turned back to the hedgehog on the horse. “Did you not confide to us that, while on the moon, he asked you to ‘end it’?”

“Well, yeah-” Sonic started.

“Tell me, brother, what was the ‘it’ he wished you to end?”

Sonic’s throat bobbed. Biscuits, sensing his favorite blue boy’s distress, whinnied and tilted his head, trying to nip his feet. Without much thought Sonic ran his hands through the horse's mane. “I wouldn’t have done it,” he mumbled.

“Done *what?”*

“You’re really pushing it, you know that dude?”

“And yet you still have not answered.”

“Fine. Jesus. *Killed* him. He wanted me to kill him, I think.” Sonic rolled his eyes and stared somewhere far off. They were misty. “Or maybe he didn’t? Maybe he just wanted everything to stop and didn’t know how else to ask.” Beneath him, Biscuit whinnied softly again. He patted at the speckled flank. “I lived in the cold and in the woods for years. I basically raised myself until I was twelve, and then Tom and Maddie *sort of* raised me without even knowing I existed for another two years. I’ve been alone, and then they pulled me out of it. And I

guess… I just don't want to leave him behind. And I think that's all he wants. Just sort of. To get forgotten. But I don't want to forget him, or let him think he isn't worth being around. Yunno?"

Knuckles climbed to the top run of the fence, sitting beside Tails. "Despite the surface-level similarities you see, your circumstances are *not* Shadow's. I do not believe he truly wished to die at the end of your battle, but I *do* believe that he was experiencing a pain so great that he could see no other path to relief. He must be shown that there are other ways. Until then, I fear he will continue to evade us."

"But how are we supposed to *do* that, if he keeps disappearing anytime we get close?"

The three of them were quiet for a long moment, only the sounds of the wind and the birds keeping the moment from being totally silent.

"This may be a task that we are ill-suited for," Knuckles said at last.

Sonic snorted, unsatisfied.

"I think he might be right, Sonic," Tails's voice was gentle. "Maybe this is one we should let the grown-ups handle."

"Though perhaps not Mother." Knuckles put a hand to his chest. "As much as it pains me to say, her position as Healer seems to upset him."

"And Dad can't even leave the house yet," Tails lamented.

"So who's that leave us with?" Sonic was still frowning. "Hm?"

Knuckles wrinkled his muzzle. "As much as I adore Wade-"

"Yeah, no way." Tails shook his head. "And Aunt Rachel's too far away…" His blue eyes widened. "Oh wait! What about Mr. Stone?"

"Seriously?" Sonic said.

"Well, he did win you over pretty quick."

"Pfft. He did not."

Knuckles was already nodding. "The Goat Milker has proven himself quite ingratiating, yes. And he, like Shadow, has recently had his only family torn violently away. Perhaps there is something there…"

"I bet if he just started cooking and left the windows open, Shadow'd come right up to his door!" Tails bounced a little, excited.

"Yeah right, you guys," Sonic scoffed. "Like all it's gonna take is a bowl of soup." He tugged on the reins and took off down the paddock.

“Shadow?”

A grunt.

“I’m going in the house.”

“I told you-”

“Yeah, I know you did.” Stone got to his feet, the porch swing bumping the backs of his legs as he stood. “But I had three cups of coffee and I refuse to pee in a bush when there’s a perfectly good powder room ten steps away.”

The hedgehog scowled, but the red static didn’t reappear.

“You’re welcome to come inside, make sure I don’t do anything else, but I’m going in.”

He was relieved when the boy slowly stood. Wordlessly, he held the front door open and let Shadow cross the threshold first. The recessed lighting switched on as they entered, and Stone went to shut the door again, but then decided against it. “Make yourself comfortable,” he said, as casually as he could, gesturing at the sectional. Then he moved towards the powder room door.

A gloved hand caught the cuff of his jacket sleeve, and he stopped.

He looked down, but Shadow wouldn’t meet his eye, mumbling something.

“Hm?”

He mumbled again but with the context clues of the boy’s stance and his flushed muzzle, Stone realized he was asking to go first.

“Oh. Yeah. By all means, guests get priority.” He waved him on with his free hand.

Shadow limped in the direction of the powder room, glaring back over his shoulder. “Don’t-”

“My feet are glued to the floor, I swear.” He put his hands up. “Here, how ‘bout this? Hey House?” A digital chime of acknowledgement sounded. “If I move from this spot, make a fuss.” Another chime. “There. Satisfied?”

Shadow nodded, but he made sure to keep glaring even as he shut the bathroom door behind him.

Stone slipped his hands into his pockets, and waited. It felt weirdly rude to just stand there in silence, listening, so instead he looked to the ceiling. “Hey House?” A chime, almost inquisitive. “What time is it?”

There were a series of little bells chiming near the television. A chorus of *look at me, look at me!* The TV lit up with 11:47.

“Hm. Just about lunchtime.”

The television flashed again, this time turning to a cooking show.

Stone glanced towards the bathroom door. “No, I don’t think I’ll be getting anything done in the kitchen today.”

The channel changed, this time to a movie. A *Pizza Planet* truck sped across the screen.

“That’s… not a bad idea.”

A printer sitting by the television on a little desk came to life and began, he assumed, to print out menus. And from the amount it was printing, he also assumed they were menus from the entire state.

When Shadow emerged again, Stone gestured at the coffee table, which was now littered with paper. “Why don’t you have a look. Pick something out. Tell House. I’ll be back out in a minute.”

“You talk to your house?” Shadow glanced around nervously, sitting straight-backed on the couch. “Is it listening right now?”

There was a chime above them. A screen on the wall by the door lit up. *On* and *Off* were displayed clearly besides a keypad.

“I guess it doesn’t have to? And honestly, kid, I’m not sure if this thing is programmed to listen or has a mind of its own. If I sit and think about it too long I might actually freak out, so I won’t. But whatever it is, it likes to be helpful, and if you’re following me around, I think a little help is warranted.” And he closed the bathroom door.

When he opened it again, Shadow was sitting on the couch exactly where Stone had left him.

“You pick anything?”

Shadow shook his head.

Stone nodded. “That’s fine. I’m pretty sure some of these are out of our radius.” He fanned them out and squinted at one of them. “This one’s in Wyoming.” He set it to the side, digging around until he’d found three he recognized from the town below. Those he placed in front of Shadow on the coffee table. “Alright. What looks good?”

Shadow stared at him.

“Don’t leave me hanging, kiddo.”

Shadow’s stare narrowed. “I’m not a *kiddo*.”

Stone lifted his hands, palms out. “Sorry. My mistake.”

The hedgehog’s throat bobbed. He reached down and touched one of the papers. Stone picked it up. “Chinese it is.”

“No phones,” Shadow said, voice low.

“I know. No phones.” He looked towards the ceiling. “Hey House? Any chance you can put in an order?”

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> Stone and Shadow continue to figure one another out. Shadow also learns about the miracle that is River'ing.

Chapter Notes

> We waited a few extra hours to post this because I (humanities_handbag) turned 30 today 🎂🎁🎉
>
> This is a present for you.
>
> Happy (humanities) birthday, and enjoy the chapter!

Stone was both relieved to see Shadow take little sips of broth and worried when the hedgehog barely ate more than that. He kept an eye out as he ate his own lunch, scarfing down fried rice knowing it could be a while before he was allowed to go into the kitchen under Shadow's nervous watch.

"You know." Stone put down his chopsticks, eyes fixed on Shadow. "The temperature's supposed to drop pretty hard tonight. You could stay for the -"

"No."

"But-"

"I don't care what you say." Shadow did his best to stand on shaky legs. He supported himself on the coffee table, pinning Stone to his spot with a glare. "I have to go. I need my cuff."

"Right," said Stone. "But what are you going to do with it when you get it?"

That gave Shadow pause. "Get away," he said, finally.

"You can barely stay standing."

"I'm the strongest weapon ever created. I'm an *ultimate lifeform*. I'll heal just fine on my own. Which is why I *need to get my cuff*, and then-"

Beneath him, his legs gave out for a moment and Stone's hands shot out to catch him.

There was a *snap* of electricity humming in the air, and the hair at the back of Stone's neck lifted.

"Don't." Shadow had caught himself again, this time against the couch. His teeth were bared, eyes glowing red.

"Sorry."

"*Don't touch me."*

"I know. I'm sorry."

Shadow sucked in a breath and did his best to stand again.

Stone abandoned whatever worry he had about electric burns and dropped to his knees, trying to catch Shadow's gaze with his own. "Ki- *Shadow*. You can't go out like this. You're not alright."

"I'm *fine*."

"At least- can I please just call-"

"No."

"Maddie might even be fine bringing the inhibitor herself-"

"No!" When Shadow jerked backwards away from Stone, his handprint was seared into the armrest. "I told you-!"

"I know. *I know.* " It was a challenge, lowering his voice to a murmur when all Stone wanted to do was reach out, grab the kid, tug him close, ask him *what was he thinking* and *this is going too far* and questions that were forming in a part of his brain he didn't know existed until the moody alien began burning holes in the upholstery. Maybe even before that. In a strange, metal crab, eating something he'd made, realizing that the weapon in front of him was too young to hold that much weight on his back.

"I know," he said again, soft as he could. "Could you just-" He scrubbed his hands over his face, collecting ideas like bits of a mismatched puzzle. They came together fast enough. A little messy. A little disorganized. But desperate enough to form *something* that looked like even the smallest spark of hope. "You're not looking good. And I'm worried that if you go out there again…" He struggled over the words before dropping them all together and hoping Shadow could hear them anyway.

Shadow stared down at the floor. At his shaking legs and swollen ankle. His eyes were glassier than they'd been earlier and when he spoke his voice was tight and pained. "I need to go," he told Stone. It was sadder this time. Pleading for Stone to understand. *Please let me go* written between the spaces of every word. *Please don't hurt me. I'm scared and no one ever comes to help.*

“I know you do.” Stone reached out a hand and let it hover over Shadow’s. When the boy didn’t spark he gently wrapped his fingers around Shadow’s wrist. “Do you think you could go after you get some sleep?”

Shadow swallowed. Winced. He seemed to consider it, looking down at his swollen ankle and patches of burnt, raw skin. Slowly, he nodded. “One night.”

It was something. Not much. Not enough. But something. And Stone would take every win handed to him with breathless relief. “One night,” he agreed quickly. “You can stay on the couch. I’ll leave the front door unlocked, and I’ll keep my door open. You’ll see everything. Sounds good?”

“And- and I get to keep the phone,” Shadow added quickly.

He flinched back when Stone stood up, watching with dull fear as he walked away into the kitchen. When Stone came back he had his phone in his hand. Crouching on the ground again he held it out to Shadow. “Will you be alright staying here while I get blankets?”

Shadow stared at the phone. His hand shot out and snatched it to his chest. He nodded.

“Okay. Stay here, alright?”

Shadow nodded again.

Stone moved to go find blankets, when, before them, the coffee table sprang open. They both jumped, Shadow sending red sparks flickering into the air. Stone frowned down at the hidden compartment full of neatly folded blankets. “Thank you, House. But maybe less sudden moves, hm?”

The TV clicked on, playing a clip of Harrison Ford, who thumped his chest with a fist and rumbled, *‘My bad.’*

“Cute.” Stone shook his head. He then set about extracting the blankets. “While you’re being helpful, how about something to pass the time, huh? Shadow, what do you want to watch?”

“...huh?”

The hedgehog was looking at him like he was speaking another language.

Stone nodded at the TV, which was still playing the episode of *Shrinking* it had cued up. “Watch? Anything you like.”

“Uh.” Still clutching the phone, still looking like the gears were turning something fierce between his ears, he shook his head. “I- I don’t know what’s on.”

“Anything you want.” Stone shook out the first throw blanket, smoothing it down over the couch cushions. “Whatever you can think of, I bet it’s streaming somewhere.”

“...Streaming?”

“Favorite show, name it.”

“Uh.” The gears ground again. “We, uh, we used to watch M.A.S.H.?”

“House? Let’s get season one of M.A.S.H. going.”

The TV blinked and the theme music filled the room and Stone couldn’t help but smile at the way Shadow gaped at the screen. “How-?”

“Welcome to the twenty-first century, kid.”

Shadow didn’t even remark about not being a kid. Eyes glued to the screen, he eased himself back up on the sofa. Stone was able to put a second blanket on his lap without a single spark.

“I’ll be in the kitchen, alright?”

Shadow, eyes on the screen in awe, nodded.

“I’m going to make you tea. Do you like tea?”

Another nod. Then; “Are there other things to… uh. River? Lake?”

“Stream. And yes.”

“How do you choose?” Shadow gestured towards the television. “There aren’t any *knobs*.”

Stone reached onto the table and picked up the remote, handing it to Shadow. Shadow stared at it and then back up at him, blinking. Stone sighed. He took five minutes to show Shadow how to work the remote; how to use the home button, how to search, volume and the on and off. Shadow snatched it back and tried it himself, staring in shock at the list of M.A.S.H episodes that flitted across the screen with just a push. He chose one at random and made a noise like a plucked goose when it began to play.

Stone snorted. “Alright. Seems like you’ve got it all under control here.”

Shadow turned the volume all the way up and then all the way down only to turn it all the way up again.

“I’m still going to make you that tea. Mint or chamomile?”

“Yes,” said Shadow, gaping down at the remote as Stone reached down and adjusted the volume to NotEarDrumPiercingThankYouVeryMuch.

“I’ll choose.”

“Uh huh,” said Shadow, back on the home screen and typing in random words to see what popped up. Under his breath, Stone heard Shadow murmuring something about what to river next.

Stone laughed and shook his head. And when he (without thinking and stunning himself) ruffled the top of Shadow's head, he was grateful to not get shocked. Shadow merely leaned into his hand, eyes on the screen. "Tea?"

"Yes, your highness," said Stone and scratched Shadow's head again before heading to the kitchen.

When he returned with a steaming mug of chamomile, he found the boy had gone back to M.A.S.H. and had settled back into the throw pillows. "There are *eleven seasons*," he said reverently.

"Yup." Stone set the mug on the coffee table. He looked at the hedgehog's bandaged foot, dangling off the couch. "We really should elevate that ank-" Before he even finished the thought, a footrest emerged from beneath the sectional. Shadow didn't even flinch, eyes still glued to the TV. "Thank you, House." Then, on a second look, he found himself grimacing at the loose, filthy bandage. "Shadow."

"Mm?"

"If you're going tomorrow, I think you're going to need some new wrapping for your ankle."

Brown eyes flicked just briefly at the aforementioned ankle. "Oh. Maybe."

"Can I do that for you?"

Shadow tucked the remote under his left arm (left hand still clutching the phone) as he stretched with his right towards the mug. "I guess." He couldn't quite reach, and with his eyes on the screen, he was dangerously close to knocking it over. "If you want."

Stone dipped down and placed the mug in the boy's outstretched hand. "Awesome, I'll get right on that." In a few quick steps he was in and out of the powder room, first aid kit in hand. He knelt in front of the sofa, opening up the metal box, pulling out a roll of gauze and setting it on the coffee table. He looked at Shadow's ankle again. "Does it hurt?"

"Huh?" Shadow asked over the top of the mug.

"I just meant, did you want something for it? Tylenol or something?"

Shadow looked away from the screen. A momentous feat.

"It's a pill."

Shadow's eyes narrowed.

Stone sighed. He rolled up his left sleeve to show off the red welt forming across his wrist, fresh from just hours before. "I'm going to take one too," he said. "We'll take it together. You can even unscrew the bottle. Alright?"

Instead of answering straight away, Shadow instead glanced down at Stone's wrist. "I did that."

“You were scared,” Stone said, slowly considering each word.

“I did that,” Shadow said again, quieter.

Breathing out and in, Stone shifted to meet Shadow at eye level. “You didn’t know.” He squeezed Shadow’s knee. The hedgehog let him. “You can unscrew the cap and give me one, too. We’ll help each other. How’s that sound?”

On screen the credits were beginning to roll, music fading off.

“Okay,” Shadow said, still quiet, but at least able to look Stone in the eye again. His gaze flitted moments later to the coffee table and he reached out, picking up the roll of bandages. “I can wrap it?” he offered shyly. “If you want?”

The next episode began to play. Stone smiled. “I’d like that.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In which things take a turn.

Chapter Notes

To our friends who use the metric system - 104 degrees F is 40 degrees C

Freshly bandaged and dosed with a Tylenol each, they binged the whole first season of M.A.S.H. Shadow actually drank all of his tea and then asked if his soup could be reheated. This led to a brief field trip to the kitchen to witness the miracle that was the microwave. And then it was back to the couch for season two.

As the sun began to set, Stone found himself brushing dirt and the crumbled husks of dead leaves off the sofa before realizing that they were dropping from Shadows quills whenever he moved.

And that just wouldn't do.

He excused himself (though the teen was so absorbed in his soup and his show that he hardly noticed) and returned a moment later with the tools for the intended task. He set them down on the coffee table: a fresh towel and washcloth, a bowl half-filled with warm, sudsy water, and a brush.

He wasn't sure what reaction he'd get, and wondered if he was making the biggest mistake of his life bringing water over to a kid who was his own Tesla Coil. But he figured it was worth the risk, if only to save the sanctity of his new couch.

And the kid's skin.

Not necessarily in that order.

He dunked the bristles of the brush into the water and began at Shadow's legs, watching for a reaction while he brushed dirt and bits of hay out. Thankfully, Shadow had realized that the remote had a voice feature and was too busy bossing around the TV, telling it to *pause* and *play* over and over again and barely noticed.

He was careful around the more tender areas. This close though he was able to better see the way Shadow's skin was raw and red, and when he hovered his hand over it, he could feel the heat radiating off. It looked… bad.

There were probably better words, but that was all he could think of, staring at the patches of skin where he was missing fur; dappling up his leg, a spot or two on his arm and shoulder.

Stone made a mental note for later to check again in the morning. For his own peace of mind.

Stone emptied out the bowl three times for the legs alone. Four for the kid's arms, which were covered in fine coats of dust. Dirt, gravel, hay, and red tinged water went down the sink each time.

And for a time he worked with his head down, focus on the child in front of him to keep from paying too close attention to the growing panic in his chest whenever he saw the bandages or clumped fur.

Until he reached the back of Shadow's head between his quills.

Shadow had been doing a pretty good job of ignoring the world up until then. He'd finished his tyrannical reign of *pause* and *play* and had moved onto muting and unmuting.

So the first time the rumbling began, it shocked them both. Stone, thinking it was the beginning of an electric spark, pulled back. On the couch, Shadow flinched and looked around, trying to find the source of the noise.

He landed on his own chest.

Stone laughed. "Did you purr?"

"No?" Shadow poked at his chest.

"I think you did."

"I think I didn't."

"Let me try something, then." The brush was back on Shadow's quills, scrubbing at the top of his head and when the rumbling began again, Stone didn't pull away. He just laughed again, reaching down with a free hand to touch Shadow's back with the tips of his fingers. "You're *purring* ."

Shadow coughed. "Am not!"

"You *are!"*

Another cough. "Don't *belittle* me."

"Big words, kid." Stone laughed and stepped away. "And fine. I'll stop-"

His wrist was grabbed before he could move onto Shadow's face. "I didn't say- I didn't say *stop* ."

It was hard to keep his smile contained. He went back to work, scratching at Shadow's head. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about. I just didn't know it was a thing you could do."

In a mumble barely loud enough to be heard over the continuous rumbling, Shadow said, "Neither did I."

That had Stone's smile faltering, and he pressed his lips together to keep them from curling downwards. His fingers snagged on a twig the length of his palm and he extracted it carefully. "Geez, what'd you do? Decide to bring the whole mountains home in your quills?"

He hadn't meant to say it. But as the word hung in the air he realized it was the first time he'd even considered thinking of the house as 'home'. He made a conscious decision to wait until long after dark to start unpacking that.

Thankfully, Shadow hadn't seemed to catch the slip. Stone could breathe again when the hedgehog only scoffed. " *You're* the one who insisted on doing this. I didn't ask to be groomed."

"But you didn't say *stop* either." Stone brought the brush up to Shadow's ears, eliciting another wave of purrs.

Shadow tilted his head from side to side, following the brush. "Little harder."

Stone complied with a fond roll of his eyes and a soft murmur of *bossy* .

The next wave was so loud it drowned out the punchline on the TV.

There was something nice about the smell of soap that Shadow had never really appreciated.

GUN facilities always had a cloying, antiseptic smell. He was washed down in it after their tests; shots and nodules and power surges, sometimes until his skin ached and he smelled like a hospital floor.

The soap Stone had used on him (without him noticing much of anything, thanks to the River in Stone's living room) was something soft and minty, and the blankets Stone was draping over him as he settled onto the couch smelled like warm cotton. It was hard to stay scared and alert surrounded by that. Especially with his head feeling just as stuffed with warm cotton, making his stomach turn. He breathed deep. All it did was sting his lungs.

"So. Tomorrow?"

Shadow glanced up and away from the blanket he'd been rubbing between his fingers. It was a little scratchy in a good way and heavy in the best. "Tomorrow?"

"You're leaving. That's what you said." Stone paused. "Unless. You changed your mind?"

Shadow let the blanket drop. It left his hand feeling empty and a little cold. “No.” His back stiffened, head high. He winced when even that little movement ached deep in his bones. “I have to. I’m not safe here.”

“Ki-Shadow-”

“I’m *not*,” Shadow said, firmer than before. And didn’t that just leave his throat feeling like he’d swallowed sandpaper.

Stone breathed. He nodded. “Do me a favor.” He fluffed a spare pillow he’d brought from the master bedroom. “Don’t leave without telling me first?”

Shadow looked back down at the blanket. He plucked at a loose fiber.

“Shadow?”

“I-” Shadow blinked. His eyes were foggy, head foggier. “I promised I’d stay the night. That’s more than I wanted to already.”

“I know. But just don’t, alright? I want to make sure I can check on you before you leave.”

“No tricks?”

“No tricks.” Stone nodded towards Shadow’s side. “You’ve got my phone. You’re the one in control here. Alright?” He took Shadow’s silence as enough of an answer and lifted the blankets, giving the pillow a pat. “Now c’mon. Lie down.”

Despite every nerve screaming at him to stay focused and alert and ready, it was a relief when Shadow did tilt cautiously backwards and sink against the pillow. His plans of rigid discipline were long gone as soon as he snuggled deeper under the covers. He did at least remember to curl around the phone, keeping it lodged between himself and the couch.

An evil plan, he determined. If Stone was concocting an evil plan against him, this was one hell of a way to do it. And it was working.

“Alright, you’ve got your water. The TV remote. You know where the kitchen is if you get hungry.”

“Mmhm.”

“And you know where I’ll be.”

“First door on the left up the stairs.”

Stone’s eyes crinkled when he grinned. “Knew you were listening.” He reached down and hesitated. He must have decided against something from the way his face shifted, instead opting to adjust the covers around Shadow’s shoulders before quickly drawing back. “Anything you need, alright?”

“Mmneed sleep.”

There was soft laughter above him, and then footsteps, and then, “Goodnight, House.”

And the lights went off.

Stone stayed up an extra hour listening to the quiet of the house as it settled around him. He held his breath. There was a heavy fear pinning him to the mattress. It wasn’t a new feeling. It had made plenty of appearances when his former… *whatever he was* was still walking the world. The nagging worry had kept him up.

But that had been dull compared to this. That had been child’s play. And that apparently changed when it came to a *child*.

Eventually, surrounded by nothing other than the creaking of the floorboards of the clicking of crickets out in the garden, he closed his eyes.

Shadow would be there in the morning. He’d talk to the kid. See how long he could get him to stick around until…

He didn’t know what came after that. Honestly. This whole situation felt like a big, empty, terrifying shrug. Like he was standing on the precipice of something that he didn’t expect. Whether to step into it or away? Well. He’d deal with that in the morning, too.

It all happened so quickly. Like an oncoming train, Shadow barely had time to realize it was coming for him until he was being hit. And it did hit. Hard enough that he woke up with an aborted scream lodged in his throat.

Like the fire so long ago, everything *burned*. His hands reached out to pat out flames that weren’t there until his hand went too far down and hit his ankle and-

He didn’t remember falling off the couch, but one moment he was lying on it, and the next he was on the floor and the world was swallowing him whole.

He was too hot. Too cold. Too everything. Flames licked at his leg beneath the skin, invisible but so torturously hot. Shadow tried to get to his feet but fell forward, barely catching himself in time.

Every single wire in his brain was screaming *danger* . There was pain, there were aches, there was a dizzying nausea taking over his whole body, and his brain did what it did best and shrieked *danger, danger, danger.*

“Gotta get out-!” His voice was little more than a frantic squeak as his eyes flickered around the room, looking for anything or anywhere to go. To escape.

They landed on the front door.

He knew it was unlocked. Stone had made a point of telling him it was, and it took some effort to drag himself across the floor to prove that. His chest was heaving by the time he got

there, and his tongue tasted like salt and iron. Hoisting himself up against the wall, all it took was a turn of the doorknob and the front door swung open.

Easy as that.

All it would take was a few steps and he'd be out. Free. Gone. *Safe*.

Except.

Except…

This pain didn't feel *safe*. Nothing about this - from the fat tears mingling with the blood on his tongue to the fire still raging beneath his skin - felt *safe.*

His brain continued to light up with cries of *danger, danger, danger* , but for the first time Shadow went against every one of those instincts and didn't move forward.

"House…"

A soft *beep* sounded above him.

"House… something's *wrong*." The night air was cool, and so Shadow stayed in front of the open door but stumbled down to the ground behind him when his weight couldn't hold him anymore. He hid a sob behind his fist. "Something's *wrong with me,*" he said again. His voice shook, practically waterlogged.

A cool breeze made its way through and touched his burning skin. In front of him, the world was wide and open.

It took everything in him not to run into the dark.

"House…"

There was a curious series of beeps. Waiting for him. Shadow shut his eyes tight.

It somehow took even more to grip his burning leg and curl into himself before whispering, "Get Stone…?"

Stone hadn't realized he'd fallen asleep until he woke up.

It was lights that did it. Red and flashing, this time without a siren. Just an eerie pulse of red cutting through the dark.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "House?"

The red pulsing continued.

"Are you… all good? Faulty wiring or something?"

The red pulsed.

“House. Turn off the lights.”

The pulsing stopped. But the silent red filled the room and remained. There was something ominous about it. Omenic.

So when his bedside clock began to beep, his heart nearly jumped out of his chest.

He sat up, feet on the cold floor. Squinted at the clock.

1:04 in the morning?

“Did you wake me up to tell me the time?”

The alarm beeped louder. He scoffed and leaned in closer.

Wait.

The colon was missing.

It wasn’t 1:04. The clock was blinking 104°.

Wait, no, 105°.

He frowned. “What are you telling me? The thermostat is broken or something?” Even as he asked, he second-guessed. The room around him was the cool 63° he’d programmed. So what-

His stomach dropped.

“Shit, *Shadow.*” He was up and running before he’d even finished the thought.

He took the steps two at a time, nearly slipping at the bottom on his socked feet. “Shadow? *Shadow!”* The open front door nearly sent Stone’s heart rocketing out of his ribs, sticking in his throat, and he bolted out onto the porch, peering out through the dark. “***Shadow!!***” he shouted at the treeline.

Stone’s heartbeat was in his ears. He couldn’t hear anything past that and his breathing and-

“Stone…”

He spun on his heel.

Curled on the floor, barely a yard away from the foot of the stairs, the boy looked up at him with wide, glassy eyes.

“Oh thank god.” Stone crouched beside him, reaching out without a thought to set a hand on top of Shadow’s head, fingers sinking into the soft tufts of fur. “You scared the shit outta me,

kid! I thought you took off!”

Shadow shook his head, leaning towards the palm. “M’hot,” he sniffled. Raising a shaking hand away from his leg, Shadow reached behind himself and pushed Stone’s cell phone across the floor. “Something’s- something’s wrong.”

“Shadow-”

Shadow shook his head. His voice shook around a sob. “Help me?”

Stone sank fully to the floor. It took two tries to get his numb fingers to grab up the phone but only one to catch the boy around the shoulders, drawing him in tight. Shadow cried out when he was jostled, but clung tight to Stone’s arm. “Yeahyeahyeah. I gotcha, kid. I gotcha.” Even as he doubted the veracity of the claim, his thumb found the newest contact in his list and pressed down hard.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

In which Shadow the Hedgehog finally, FINALLY sees a doctor.

Maddie rolled over in bed, groggily glaring at the dimly glowing screen of the phone that was vibrating on her nightstand. Beside her, Tom snored soundly, unperturbed. Figures that of the two of them, she got the 'parent sense' that had her waking at the slightest noise. She slapped a hand onto the phone, dragging it across the wood, wondering who in the world could possibly be calling at such an ungodly hour.

'STONE' the screen read.

She bolted upright, startling Ozzie, who raised his head with a disapproving chuff.

"Shit." She swiped on the green circle. "Did you find him??"

"HowdoIstopafever!?"

Tom snorted awake when Maddie swung herself out of bed. "Stone, *slow down*."

"Fever." Stone was loud enough that Maddie could drop the phone onto the bed. She put it to speakerphone anyway and began opening and closing dresser drawers. "I need to stop it, Maddie! How do I- I don't know how to deal with it in a kid!"

"I need more than that, Stone!"

"How much more do you need!" His voice was dripping in panic hiding desperately behind anger. She'd heard it before. From herself and Tom more times than she'd have liked. But that was one of the side effects of having children.

"Stone, I know you're scared, but I need you to focus."

"Yeahyeahsorryyeah."

"Tell me what's happening."

"Um. Uh. Fever. One oh… five?"

"Oh damn," Tom muttered. "That's not good."

"Tom," Maddie hissed, tossing her hair scarf at him. He caught it easily with a mouthed *sorry.* Stone's breathing picked up on the other end, words sticking together. "Stone-"

“I don’t *know*, Maddie! I don’t know!”

“Okay. Okay.” She threw off her pajama shirt and pulled on her scrubs. “Put me on speaker. Can you do that?”

There was some fumbling. Then; “You’re on speaker.”

“Shadow? Are you there, sweetheart?”

There was a strangled sound from the other end of the line.

“I hear you’re not feeling great?”

A hitched breath, a choked pull of air, and then “...hurts.”

Her heart wrenched and she sat down on the bed, tugging on socks. “Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere.” A sharp intake of air. “My leg.”

“His ankle.” Stone. “I- I thought it was just sprained, but-”

“What color is it?”

“Huh?”

“His ankle.” Maddie was up again, picking up the phone and heading for the hall, waving to Tom over her shoulder. “What color is it? Under the fur. He's missing some patches. It'll be easier to see.”

“Oh. Um. Shit.” There was a shuffling. “Shadow- Shadow, I gotta-” A strangled howl of pain. “I’msorryI’msorry! Uh, here. Yeah, just hold on tight, ok?” A whimper. “Oh, Jesus…”

“Stone? Talk to me, c’mon.” Maddie hurried down the stairs.

“It’s fucking *hot*.”

Maddie had her keys in hand as she stepped into her flats. “Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of.”

“What? What were you afraid of?!”

“I’ll bet anything it’s broken.” She locked the front door behind her. “And, listen Stone I'm not trying to scare you. I'm not. But it sounds like he's septic, and if that's the case-"

Another whimper cut her off, and then Shadow’s voice asked, “What does that mean?”

She slipped into the driver’s seat of the minivan, choosing her words as carefully as she could manage, keeping her voice even and low even as her fingers gripped the steering wheel. “It means bacteria got into your injury, honey. It’s why you’ve got such a high fever. They’re attacking your body and your body’s trying to fight back, but it can’t do it alone.”

“...it can’t?”

“I’m afraid not.” She slid the key into the ignition. “But listen. If you and Stone meet me at my office, I've got everything we need. X-ray, antibiotics, you name it. We can even the odds in this fight.” She gripped the wheel tighter. Her knuckles were pale through her skin. “What do you think?”

There was some shuffling, and then a quiet question. “Will you… stay with me?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but realized quickly that the question wasn’t for her.

“Absolutely, kiddo.” Stone murmured. “I’ll be right here, alright?”

Maddie’s heart swelled.

“We’ll be there as soon as we can,” Stone told her.

“I’ll be waiting.” She ended the call, turned the key, and pulled out of the driveway.

Maddie had everything ready well before they arrived. Knowing Shadow, knowing that fear could push him to tip away and out of reach, she didn’t want to waste a moment. It was a delicate balance; urgency and the panicked history laying under the child’s skin.

She heard his car peeling into a spot on the street ten minutes after she’d arrived and was right there to greet him when he scrambled out of the car, rounding it to the passenger side before appearing again, carrying a shivering Shadow wrapped in an afghan.

“Hey, baby.” She scanned his temperature when he was close enough, hissing at the number that popped up onto the infrared screen. “We’re in room one, alright?”

Shadow’s eyes flickered about as Stone followed Maddie down the hall, catching sight of a wall of cages for their overnight guests through another door. “You’re not gonna lock me up, right?” His voice was small. Each syllable shook.

“Oh, honey *no*.” She opened a door farther down and ushered them in. “Stone’s going to stay right next to you the whole time.”

The metal table had already been draped in paper and it crinkled when Stone put Shadow down. Shadow’s breath hitched, legs pulled to his chest. He pulled them tighter to himself when Maddie walked closer, latex gloves on her hands.

There was a rolling table beside her. A scalpel gleamed, capped needle beside it. Shadow’s chest stuttered. A spark popped off his side and he sobbed.

Stone reached out to grab his hand and squeeze tight. “Breathe, kiddo.”

Shadow looked between him and Maddie. His chin wobbled. “What if I changed my mind?”

“Sweetheart-”

“What if it can get better on its own?” Tears dripped down and clung to his chin. Plopped down to the paper. “Please?”

Maddie stepped closer. She raised her gloved hands. “I won’t touch you if you don’t want me to.”

Shadow shuffled backwards. His eyes were swimming. Stone stared at Maddie over the child’s head, pleading, but she only shook her head at him. *Let me do this.*

He swallowed and then nodded reluctantly, letting her turn her attention back to the scared child sitting in front of her.

“This won’t get better on its own.” She kept her voice low and even. She’d done everything to keep the room calm; lowering the lights and turning on the white noise machines she kept around for the overnight pets. “And if we don’t help it, it’s going to get worse. And I can’t promise what will happen to you if I don’t.”

Stone reached down with a free hand and carefully wiped at Shadow’s face with his fingers, swiping away tears. It was futile, but that wasn’t the point.

“But if you let me help then I promise, Shadow -I *promise*- you’ll be alright. *Better* than alright.”

Shadow sniffled. He leaned into Stone’s hand, still dabbing at his wet face. “You’ll tell me what you’re doing?”

“The whole time.”

“And-” his breath caught. “And after? You won’t- you won’t send me anywhere?”

“Never.”

Stone lowered down next to him. He offered a hand. After a moment, Shadow took it. “I know what you told me before. And I know you might not believe me. But I want to help you. I’m going to keep you safe.”

Shadow looked at their linked hands.

He nodded. “Okay,” he whispered.

Maddie explained it all as they went through the motions. She explained the x-ray machine when it whirred and clicked and let Shadow look at the pictures himself, pointing out the clean break and the infection around it. How the infection had caused his white blood cells to coagulate underneath the skin and how *that* was causing the swelling. How it was going to need to be drained and the bone reset and how he could choose between general or local anesthetic before she did any of those things.

He opted for local, but when she prepped the needle, they hit their first snag.

Red sparks flew and he gasped apologies between panicked sobs and Stone held him steadfastly, jaw set so as not to show how each singe hurt.

“I'm sorry,” Shadow said again through gasps when he saw the gnarled scars down Stone's arms. Superficial but deep enough to sting. “I'm so sorry!”

“Don't be.” And though his arms were rigid, his voice somehow managed tenderness. “I'm alright, kiddo.”

“I hurt you!”

Stone rested his chin against the top of Shadow’s head. “I've had worse.”

“You should let go!”

“Don't think I will, if it's all the same to you.”

Shadow stayed frozen until Stone gave his shoulder a squeeze and he sank against Stone's chest gratefully.

Maddie recalculated, and soon Shadow was taking shallow breaths into a plastic face mask attached to a tank of nitrous oxide.

That too received its own pushback when the gas began to do its job and Shadow was pushing against her arm. She pulled away and yanked down her N-95 before he could get too worked up.

“Don' like-” He was slurring but his eyes were sharp. He gestured around them, gaze lingering on her, on a scalpel sitting across the counter where they'd obviously tried to keep it out of sight. “Don' like- can't sleep, can't close m’ eyes. Not *here.”*

“Baby, we're too far in to stop now.” She reached carefully out and rested her hand just beside him, palm up. She'd been no-contact since he arrived, too afraid of slicing what little trust he'd offer her. “You won't feel anything.”

“Gotta stay ‘wake,” Shadow pleaded.

And then he grabbed her hand back.

Such a small gesture and it felt larger than anything.

When he sparked, she felt the current run through her. Behind Shadow, Stone winced. Shadow tried to pull away, horrified, but she couldn't seem to let him. It felt like a tether and she held just as securely back.

“Can' here.” His hands shook in hers. She wanted to cry.

“Baby-”

“Hey, kid. Remember when we were watching M.A.S.H. together? Remember Hawkeye?:

“Haw’eye.”

“What’s his job?”

Shadow blinked. “...d’ct’r.”

He squeezed his arms around Shadow and gave Maddie a look. “That’s right. He tried to help as many people as he could, right?”

Against his chest, the boy nodded. The red glow in his eyes faded, leaving them glassy brown again. The grip he had on Maddie’s hand slackened, and she felt his claws retract under the gloves.

“Maddie’s just doing *that*. So you’re going to go to sleep for a bit, and I’m going to stay right here, and we’re going to get your ankle taken care of and clean up the rest of these scrapes and burns, alright?”

“...r’ght h’re?”

“Right here,” said Stone as the mask went back on. He ran a steady hand through Shadow's quills. “Now, tell me. Top ten outfits Klinger wore to try and get discharged.”

Shadow's face scrunched, thinking past the fog. But he didn’t even get to name Number Three before his eyes fluttered closed and his body slumped against Stone.

Maddie sighed in relief. “Okay.”

“Now what?”

She spun back to the table, picking up one of the unused syringes. “Now, we make sure he *stays* under until it’s done. You wanna lay him down and scrub up?”

“Huh?”

“I could use an extra pair of hands. I mean, I assume you’ve got some first aid experience. I can set you up to take care of the more superficial injuries and we can get this whole thing done quicker.”

“Uh-”

Maddie looked up from where she was trying to find a vein. “You can take directions, right?”

“Oh!” He perked up. “I’m great at that.”

“Yeah, you seem like someone who would be.” She paused, tossing the empty syringe into the medical waste bin. “No offense.”

“No, you’re pretty spot on.” It was his turn to pause. “You seem like someone who enjoys giving directions.”

She winked at him and readjusted her N95. “You’re onto something, Stone. Now c’mon. We’ve got work to do.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

> In which Shadow wakes up, flirts with doctors, doles out scathing burns, and turns toward forgiveness (not necessarily in that order).

Shadow was floating.

He wasn't sure where or when or for how long. He just floated, mind curled up tight and safe in a vast Nothing.

A black Nothing. A quiet Nothing.

The Nothing wasn't entirely silent though. There were voices, muffled as if underwater. Words he couldn't distinguish. It was odd to watch the scenery change around him in flashes and pinpoints of memory. The ceiling of Maddie's clinic had turned to the sky. Someone said something to him, but it sounded like the trombone voices from Charlie Brown and he couldn't latch onto any words. He blinked, and there was soft music and the world was moving. Beams of light beating across his face made him squint and when he blinked them away, he was moving up, step by step.

His brain was trying to work. To put together variables. What he saw and what he heard had to mean something.

He was just too tired to care.

GUN could have come through and taken him, but all he knew was the soft surface he was being set down on and the Nothing took him again.

Another blink (it could have been years or seconds or months or days) and someone was touching his forehead. They held up a hand in front of his face and asked him about how many. He wasn't sure what they meant. "No, thank you," he remembered saying back.

There was a sound. Laughter. Or maybe a sneeze.

"Gazutoot," he said, because he was a very polite hedgehog. And then, because he was also a very tired hedgehog; "go'way."

They didn't go away, annoyingly. They instead helped him sit up and propped a cloud behind him. There was something put into his paw and a straw held up near his face. Maybe ice cream? He'd never had ice cream.

He looked at what was in his hand. It wasn't ice cream. It was a tablet. He glared at it. "S'not i'cream."

They tapped his paw.

Maybe once, he would have done something with the direction, but Maddie and Stone had told him that he was allowed to choose. And he *liked* choosing.

"I'cream."

There was another noise. The tablet and the person disappeared, and when they appeared again so did a spoon heaped with something that smelled like chocolate.

He took the spoon before they could help and missed his mouth once. Twice.

On the third time he stabbed his chin. He sniffled. "Hate you," he told the spoon through barley suppressed tears, because he was a very *reasonable* hedgehog who expressed his feelings.

The person took the spoon and helped. Then they scrubbed at his face and helped him lie back down.

They said something that sounded a lot like *go back to sleep.*

And because he was a very *brave* hedgehog; "I do what I want." He thought a moment before adding a scathing, "ya square." He raised his fist. "Got'em."

Suitably got, the person left. Probably to lick their wounds in shame.

He only had a minute to rejoice his victory before he was slipping back into the Nothing again.

There were other bursts.

Flashes of colors and noises. Pressure, too. His legs and arms were moved.

Someone was there for more than one flash in a row. They sat somewhere nearby and had a hand on his head, scratching gently. They smelled like cologne and grass and sounded like how he imagined Home should feel.

And there were even more bursts after that.

The sound of clinking. Footsteps and more trombone voices. The light pooling through, creeping towards him. When it did eventually hit his face (delightfully warm, annoyingly bright) he was met with a blue blob of a thing standing next to him.

"You look gnarly, dude."

Shadow blinked. It sounded like, looked like-

“S‘nic?”

The blue blob that was Sonic beamed. “You’re gonna have a cool scar I bet.” He put his elbows on what Shadow deduced was a mattress when it sank slightly under the weight. “I’ve got a couple, but you can’t really see ‘em ‘cuz of the fur. I guess yours is gonna be, like, hidden by your socks or whatever, but it’s all good. We both know it’s there and how badass it is.” He closed his fist and tapped his knuckles against Shadow’s limp hand. Then he frowned, took hold of Shadow’s wrist and raised it off the comforter so he could try again.

“Wh’t’re y’doin’?”

“Trying to power bump you, dude.” Sonic tapped their knuckles together once more. “Work with me here, close your fist.”

Shadow tried. Sent the signal to his fingers, but they only curled slightly.

Frustration built up quick. Fear might have followed close behind had Sonic not laughed and dropped his arm back to the bed. “Aw, don’t worry. You’re on the *good stuff* . That’s what Dad said, anyway.”

He laid Shadow’s hand back down again, and for the first time Shadow noticed that the golden inhibitor cuff was clasped back in place. Without his gloves on it didn’t fit quite as snugly as usual, but there it was, glinting in the light swathed across the covers.

“M’sorry I took it,” Sonic said. “I didn’t mean to. Did it mess you up real bad?”

Shadow thought about all the hard landings, the lack of control, the seared muscles and frayed nerves, and his brows knit together. He turned back to Sonic-

-and saw the fear in his green eyes.

The anger fizzled just as quickly as it had reared up.

“Nah.”

The fear vanished, replaced with the beaming smile again. “Are you hungry? Do you want to eat something? I can get you something! How much can you chew or is this a straw only situation, because we’ve got a blender and I’m pretty sure I can get *anything* into it if Mom isn’t looking-”

“What exactly will I not be looking at?”

“Oh *hiiiiii* , Mom!” Sonic pushed away from the bed as Maddie came through the open doorway. “I was just checking on the patient.”

“He’s supposed to be resting, Blueberry.”

She went to pet the top of his head but he pushed her hand away, whining, “Don’t call me *that* in front of him! Be *cool* , Mom, geez!”

“Oh, forgive me.” She tweaked his nose, and then put a hand on his shoulder, nudging him towards the door. “Now out. When he’s cleared for visitors, you’ll be the first to know.”

“But Stone got to be in here all morning!”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

She gave him a further nudge. “It just is. Now scoot, Mr. Fuzzbutt.”

“Mother!”

But scoot he did, and she closed the door after him. When she turned back to the bed, her smile was fond. “He means well. He was *so* upset that he wasn’t home last night, but I think it was for the best.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out an infrared thermometer. She held it up near his forehead. “How’re you feeling?”

“Heavy.”

The thermometer beeped and she showed him the screen. “Look at that! One oh one.”

“Is that… bad?”

“No. It means you’re coming back down to normal. Another day or two and I’d bet anything your fever’s gone.” The thermometer went back into her pocket.

He tried to say something, but his voice caught. When she looked at him patiently, he tried again. “What happened to me?” He stared forward at the white covers almost too afraid to know. He couldn’t feel his leg. Anxiety was sticking to his throat. “Did- am I okay?”

“You want to see?”

He nodded and she helped him sit up before rolling back the covers. He’d been expecting the worst, he realized. Science experiments and government facilities had a tendency to fill the brain with ugly thoughts. Mangled limbs or tubes and needles.

Maybe no leg at all.

What he ended up looking at, beyond bandaged burns and cuts, was a red cast.

“Oh.”

“Were you expecting worse?”

“Kind of…?”

She laughed. “We did our best with the color. Stone wasn’t sure what your favorite was, but we thought red would work with your… *highlights?”* She gestured towards him. “Sonic says I’m incurably uncool because I’m a mom, but I think it was pretty fashion forward of me.”

He stared down at the cast. His toes poked out of the end. He tried to wiggle them but nothing happened.

“It’ll get feeling back. Sooner than you want, probably, but we’ll keep you on some stuff until we switch you to tylenol.” There was a chair near the bed and she pulled it closer. When she sat down, they were eye to eye. “I know that you had plans before, and I know that this wasn’t a part of them.” When she reached out her hand it was palm up on the bed. He only hesitated for a few beats before he took it. Her grip was steady. “I gotta be honest with you. I promised you that you’d get to make decisions, but I’m scared to let you go off on your own.

Tom and Stone and I have been talking it over, and we’re not sure what to do next. But we promised, so I figured I’d ask you what you wanted. And we can figure it out from there. Maybe make a compromise if you do want to leave.”

“Oh.” He looked past her out the window. “It’s up to me?”

“It is.” She spoke slowly, choosing each word. “Like I said. We’ll find a compromise. I can’t let you just run off like this. But I won’t make you stay forever, either.”

Shadow kept his eyes fixed on the window. It was bright out. The sky was blue and the trees he could see swayed back and forth. But somehow it still looked cold outside. And lonely.

“Could I just- can I decide later?”

Maddie let out a breath and smiled. She squeezed his hand. “You absolutely can.” She pulled her hand back and stood up. “Now, do you want to take another nap, or do you want to come downstairs? When Stone wasn’t in here, he was stress-cooking, so there’s plenty to eat.”

Shadow glanced towards the door. “He's here?”

“He left five minutes ago to get something from the supermarket. He'll be back soon, though. He didn't want to miss you waking up, but there was a *spice emergency* , whatever that means, so go easy on him.” It got a smile out of him and she stood a little straighter, pleased. “Now. Feel free to say no, but if you'd like, you can come down? Be around some people for a little while? I can't promise complete peace and quiet knowing my boys, but they promised to try their best. We even sent our dog to stay with my husband's parents for a few days. Just in case. Not that he's not friendly, but the last time you met didn't go so well." She extended her hands. "So?"

He considered the room around him. Nodded.

“It’ll be easier if I carry you down. Unless you’re like my son and you can’t bear to be uncool, and then we can figure out something else.”

“I can be uncool.”

Maddie stood and smoothed out her comfortable looking Green Hills Baseball sweats. “And that is the coolest thing of all.”

“He has risen!” Sonic had his fists above his head, standing on the coffee table when Maddie placed Shadow onto the sofa.

From the couch, Tom poked his middle child with one of his crutches. There was a laundry basket at his feet and a pile of folded socks beside him. “We eat off that table, man, get down.”

“More formidable hedgehog!” Knuckles beamed at Shadow from his spot on the couch as Sonic grumbled and stepped off the table, going to sit beside his eldest brother. “You look terrible!”

“You can’t just say that!” Tails was sitting on the back of the couch, sliding down when his mother gave him a look.

“But he *does* look terrible. Look at him.”

Maddie let out a long suffering sigh. “Knuckles, honey, what did we say about observations?”

“That they stay inside of my head,” he grumbled down at his paws. “Even if it is true.” He peeked up at Shadow. “I am sorry that my inside comments ended up on my outside. I will make sure to lie to you next time you look horrible to spare your feelings.”

“Knuckles…”

“I am *trying my best* , Mother!”

“Let’s try and keep all the noises to a minimum, alright?” Maddie must have noticed the way Shadow was tensing and draped a blanket across his lap.

“But *Mom* -”

“Mother, we only just saw him again!”

“If you’re bored, then you can help your father fold laundry or help clean up Storm Stone in the kitchen. But find something to do or be *quieter* .”

Knuckles and Sonic grumbled and sat back, though Knuckles did eventually wander off into the kitchen, Tails following cheerily behind.

Tom waved a shirt at Sonic. “Want to get in on this, bud?”

Sonic rolled his eyes but did pick up a shirt from the basket, twisting it into something that resembled a folder shirt until Tom gave him a look and he tried again.

“Shadow, honey,” Maddie said, getting his attention again. “I’m getting your next round of meds. You think you can do these *without* ice cream?”

He frowned trying to remember anything from the fog that had taken up his head the past day. “Did I… take them with ice cream?”

Sonic, tired of folding, slipped off the couch. “The whole *house* got to hear about it.”

Knuckles’ head popped out of the kitchen just as Sonic walked in. “This is true. You have a warrior's cry, my friend.”

Shadow put a hand to his face, “Oh, great.”

“Your manner of insults was *most* intriguing. Though I must ask, what does it mean to ‘dip in one’s cool aid’?”

Shadow’s other hand joined the first.

Tom twisted around, one arm on the back of the couch. “Sit on it, the both of you.”

Shadow raised his head, eyebrows high.

As his sons scampered off and Tom resettled on the couch, he caught Shadow’s eye and grinned. “Born in seventy-three. Gotta say, you had me on quite a nostalgia trip when they brought you in.”

“Uh.”

Tom dipped down to snag another pair of socks from the basket. “Haven’t heard anyone call my wife a ‘foxy lady’ since Wade went on his roller-disco kick.”

“I *didn’t* .” Shadow put his face in his hands again.

“No hard feelings.” Tom rolled the socks together and went for another pair. “You were super polite about it, from what I heard.” He lowered his voice to a shoddy impression of the hedgehog beside him. *“ I had my doubts about you, but turns out a doctor can **also** be a brick house. A real groovy chick.* Pretty sure there were a few others, but they all kind of blended together after a while.”

Shadow groaned into his palms and Tom laughed. “Listen, I’ve said my fair share of nonsense. My kids keep telling me stories when I was in the hospital for this.” He wiggled his casted foot and the sling around his arm.

From where he was sitting, Shadow had a closer look at Tom. He traced a path with his eyes from the sling to the cast to the bruise next to Tom’s ear and down his arm.

Tom noticed before he could say anything. “You don’t have to.”

Shadow flinched upright. “What?”

“I’ve gotten really good at reading my kids’ faces. Not that you’re the same, but you’ve got enough in common.”

“Uh?”

“You looked ready to apologize. Unless I’m wrong and you weren’t going to, but your face had apology written all over it.”

“I… was.”

“Told you.” Tom finished folding the last pair of socks and moved onto a shirt. “So I’m telling you right now, don’t.”

“Oh.” A slow drip of cold worked its way down Shadow’s spine and he sank down. “I understand. It was unforgivable. And I truly didn’t mean to-”

“Not like that.” Tom put the shirt to the side. “I’m not saying that you can’t do anything to make it up to me. There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“But. No. I *hurt* you.”

Tom shrugged. “You hurt who you thought was someone who’d hurt *you* . We got a little of your story from the boys. I think of it as a ‘wrong time, wrong place, wrong face’ kinda situation.”

Shadow balked. “...That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Tom rolled another pair of socks. “Shadow, one of my kid’s was on his own until he was thirteen. My eldest buried half his village when he was a kid. And my youngest- He’s actually fine, bad example. The point is, I deal with traumatized children, and I’ve been doing it for two years. So I’m telling you. I get it. You and me? We’re copacetic, kid.”

Shadow ducked his head but knew it was useless. Tom saw his smile anyway. “Groovy,” said Shadow.

Tom laughed. “The grooviest.”

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Shadow settles in, Stone returns, and a holiday is on the horizon.

Chapter Notes

Two important notes!

1) Sorry for the delay! Both myself and Invader_Sam have been on and off being sick (boo) and busy (also boo), so I'm posting today and we'll get back onto a regular schedule next Monday.

and 2) Just a reminder that the movie came out at the end of 2024! Following that timeline, we have the Wachowski's prepping for Thanksgiving.

Don't let the weather outside your windows deceive you. In here it's still fall and a turkey is defrosting.

Enjoy!

It only took Shadow thirty minutes on the couch to start to squirm. It had been easier when he'd been laying in his endless fog, but now, between Maddie's frequent check-in's and Tom's occasional quips, it didn't take him long to get antsy.

"One oh one." Maddie showed Shadow the thermometer. He had two blankets on, chills back. Minutes ago the blankets had been next to him, grumbling about sweat.

He wiggled frustratedly. His whole body ached. "It's not going down."

"It's not going up, either." It was a feat that he only flinched a little when she took out her stethoscope. She held it out and waited for a nod before she pressed it up and down his back.

"I never got sick before."

Actually, he couldn't remember ever being sick - not under the scrutiny of scientists and doctors following his every vital with steely eyes.

Maddie wrote something onto a piece of paper that went into her pocket with the thermometer. "This isn't just a cold. You'll probably get those too - and we'll definitely have

to talk about vaccinations later - but you survived an *explosion* . It doesn't help that you had a few days outside. Not enough sleep, not enough food, open wounds, a broken ankle. It was good you asked for help when you did, but now you've got to give it time."

"How much time?"

"Baby, it's only been a *day.* Be patient. You were close to septic. Your body is healing." Shadow glared at his casted foot. Maddie tweaked his nose. "You should have seen yourself last night. This is leagues better."

"Oof, yeah." Tom nodded, shaking the wrinkles as best he could out of a jersey. WACHOWSKI was written across the back in big, leather letters. "Heard all about that. You gave all of us a hell of a scare."

"Sorry…"

"No, honey. No sorries." She pulled bottles of pills from her seemingly bottomless pockets and sorted through them, handing them over to Tom and Shadow. "Now, down the hatch boys. You're on a schedule."

"Look at us!" Tom waved his clenched, pill filled fist at Shadow before the kid had a chance to worry about what he'd been given. "We're Pill Pals!"

Maddie rolled her eyes. She pushed their drinks closer before bending down to point at each tablet in Shadow's hand. "Blue is for pain, yellow is antibiotics. You have a green one for sleeping, but that's only if you really need it at night, alright?"

"Mhm."

"And in the meantime, we can watch something." Tom lifted up a black rectangle and gave it a waggle.

Shadow sat up. "You can river too!?"

Tom paused. Whatever he was going to say next had bought a one way ticket out of his brain. "Sorry. What?"

"How can no one in this godforsaken town sell sumac!" The front door opened and closed and Stone kicked off his shoes. They made a sharp *thunk thunk* when they hit the wall.

"Hey there, Stone!" Tom rested the remote on his thigh and grinned at Shadow. "You'll never guess what."

"Do you know how many stores I had to visit?" Stone huffed and stomped down the hall, stopping in the living room entryway. There were bags on each arm and his mouth was pinched. " *Three*, Tom. *Three* stores."

"Stone, did you notice-"

"I had to go to the *next town*, Tom."

“Oh, hey there, Stone!” Maddie was back with a mug of tea, setting it in front of her husband. “We were waiting for you to get back. Did you get to see-”

“Madeline, your town has *no taste*.”

She stared at him, mouth frozen open mid sentence.

“I had to practically do charades just to get someone to give me a name that sold decent spices. Thank god for Google, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Right, but-”

“Maddie, I’ve got two fish to marinate and three different meats in here to dry rub. I don’t have time to talk. Now if you’ll excuse me.” And then Stone spun on his heel and marched into the kitchen, bags on each arm.

There was a pause, and then the bags were hitting the floor and the socked feet were rushing back down the hall towards the living room. There was a *whump* as his shoulder hit the door frame when he failed to slow himself down, but he bounced right back up, gaping.

Tom gave a little wave, grinning. Then he nudged Shadow with his elbow.

The hedgehog also raised his hand shyly. It was so strange, the way Stone was staring at him. He didn’t know what to do with the warmth that was blooming in his stomach, so he tried to tamp it down. “H’llo.”

Stone was across the room in three long strides, coming to crouch in front of the sofa. One knee bumped the laundry basket and he didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands. He settled on resting him on his knees. “You’re up!” The statement was breathless.

“Uh huh.” Shadow nodded.

“How, uh-” Stone raised his hands again, reaching out and then pulling back, gripping the edge of the cushion. “How’re you feeling?”

Shadow fidgeted with the blanket in his lap. “Better than yesterday.” On impulse he stretched a hand out, brushed his fingers against the man’s knuckles. “Thanks to you.”

Stone took the invitation (a relief; Shadow wasn’t sure how he was going to ask) and turned his hand around. It gave Shadow an opening to grab Stone’s hand between his paws. “Nah. You were a trooper. Asking for help like that?” He squeezed Shadow’s paws. “That’s some real top shelf bravery, kiddo.”

Shadow ducked his head to hide his smile and shrugged.

From the couch and just in front of them, out of view, Maddie and Tom locked eyes.

“Oh!” Shadow didn’t leave anyone much time to ruminate in the moment, head popping back up. “Stone, Tom and Maddie can river! I thought you were the only one, but *they can do it too.*”

Tom lifted an arm in defeat and let it drop back down with a dull smack. “I still don’t get what that means.”

“Stream, buddy.” Stone said, good-naturedly. “It’s called streaming.”

Tom’s mouth formed an amused ‘o’ as he picked up the remote.

“I was thinking of putting on an old Bruce Lee movie.” Tom turned on the TV. “We’ve been bonding over the grooviness of the 70's.”

“And I’ve been ignoring them,” added Maddie.

“Well, let me know what you choose. I’m going to finish what I started in the kitchen.” Stone rose to his feet, reaching down one last time and hesitating before finally smoothing out the clumped fur between Shadow’s ears.

He went into the kitchen beaming when Shadow let him.

“Hey Mom?”

“What’s up?”

“With all the bajillion things Stone made today taking up all the real estate in the fridge, where’s the turkey gonna go?”

From her armchair, mostly-empty dinner plate still in her lap, Maddie gestured with her fork. “Ah, see, I lucked out and Grandma’s handling the turkey this year. Plus, with how well you boys have been eating when Stone cooks, I have a feeling the fridge is gonna empty out again real soon.”

Seated on the ottoman in front of her, Sonic looked at his own licked-clean plate. “Good point. Are we a hundred percent sold on that? Because I for one would be very curious about what our good agent could do with a bird that big.”

Tom snorted. “Sonic…”

“I’m just sayin’!”

Tails, who was on the floor with his plate on the coffee table, turned to Stone, who was seated cross-legged next to him. “You’re coming for Thanksgiving, though, right?”

“Uh.” Stone turned questioning eyes to Tom.

“You’re more than welcome. ‘Specially since we’ll be holding this guy for observation for a while yet.” Tom jerked a thumb in Shadow’s direction.

Shadow, who’d been still licking his own plate, looked up. “Huh?”

“It is a grand Earth tradition!” Knuckles informed him from the other armchair. “There is a large roasted fowl as Sonic mentions, and the foot of ball on the magic box. And then, if you are chosen, you may break apart the bones of the fallen bird to receive your fortune. And-”

“I know *what* Thanksgiving is,” Shadow interrupted. “I just… had no idea it was close.” He tilted his head. “Aside from it being 2024, I don’t actually know *when* we are right now.”

“November 26th,” Tails provided helpfully. “So it’s in two days! That’s why we weren’t in school today.”

That had Shadow tilting his head in the other direction. “...School?”

“You know, school,” Sonic said. He set his plate down on the coffee table. “The place with the teachers and the books and the lockers and-”

“I *know* what school is.” Shadow stretched to try and put his own plate down, couldn’t quite reach, and was assisted by Tom. “I lived in an underground bunker, not under a *rock* . I was just- you mean you *attend* school with *humans*?”

“It is not as bad as it sounds,” Knuckles said. “The hallways are labyrinthine, but the humans are actually quite friendly, for the most part.”

“The humans are *alright*,” Sonic said. “Except for Jeremy. Jeremy’s the best.”

“You only say that because you have not kissed one yet,” Knuckles leaned forward in his chair and looked at Shadow. “He is jealous because he is not good at girlfriends and I am.”

“I’m not jealous!”

“It is alright, brother. You have many other mediocre qualities.”

“Mom!”

“Anyone want a beer?” Maddie was out of her seat alarmingly fast, snatching plates.

“Mom!”

“You’re on your own, Sonic.”

“If you need help, you may ask me, brother. I am the best at girlfriends.”

“I don’t- I’m not- *ugh*.” Sonic threw up his hands before slouching down, arms across his chest. “I don’t need to hear about any of your gross dating stuff. Not everyone cares.”

“I’d like to hear about gross dating stuff,” said Tom. “And also I’d like a beer.”

“You got it. Stone? Beer?”

“Oh, uh, I’m not much of a drinker.” Stone rubbed the back of his neck. “If I had a beer, I probably wouldn’t be able to drive home, so-”

“That’s no problem. We can always put an air mattress in the guest room with Shadow.”

His face brightened considerably. “Well! I guess then…” He turned to catch Shadow’s eye. “...if that’s okay with you?”

“Yes!” It was fast enough of an answer that Shadow took himself by surprise, and he did his best to cover his tracks with a weak, “I mean, if *you* want to.”

Maddie and Tom exchanged another look.

“Three beers then.” Maddie said as she left the room.

“I feel the conversation has become derailed,” Knuckles pouted.

Tom patted the armrest to his left. “Nah, c’mere, big guy. You got pics from your last date I haven’t seen yet?”

“Do I!” The echidna bounded out of his chair so forcefully that it tipped over backwards with a heavy *thud*. “One moment, Father! I must retrieve my phone!”

As he thundered out of the room, Sonic scowled up at Tom. “Why’d you go and get him started again, huh?”

“Forgive me for wanting a good dose of father-son bonding.”

“I could give you bonding! Enough for the both of us!”

Tom patted the spot on the couch between himself and Shadow that was still empty. “Come on up then.”

Sonic did so, smiling.

The smile didn’t last, though, as Knuckles returned with his phone and parked himself on Tom’s left. *“Look*, father!”

“Oh *come on,* no, Knuckles-*”*

“Observe! This is myself and Zoe deciding to go to the mini golf course, and this is us in front of the mini golf course, and this is us choosing our colored weapons at the mini golf course, and this is us deciding we liked different colors of weapons at the mini golf course, and this is Zoe making an excellent shot at the mini golf course, and this is me hitting a ball at the mini golf course, and this is the hole that the ball made through the windmill at the mini golf course, and this is us getting kicked out of the mini golf course-”

Sonic shifted down the couch to sit besides Shadow. “You don’t have to listen to everything he says. I don’t.”

Shadow looked around Sonic. “Is it like this every night?”

“What? Him talking about his girlfriend.” He said the word *girlfriend* like he’d just bitten into a lemon. Pinched eyebrows and all. “Nah. Sometimes, but I got really good at tuning him out, so-”

“No. Not *that*. I just- is it always like *this*.” Shadow could only hope Sonic understood as he gestured around himself, beyond them, beyond the room, beyond the chatter of Tom and Knuckles. It was impossible to put into words feeling he was trying to give a face and a name.

Through the chaos and the noise and the endless movement, there was an order to the house. A warmth.

It was something he desperately wanted to meld into a shape and hold tight to keep.

Like he’d always wanted it before he’d even known what it was.

He’d gotten it once before, with Maria. But he’d never been allowed to figure it out before she was gone and he was dragged back down into the deep and the dark and the nameless.

He’d been so close then before it had been ripped away.

He was almost afraid to reach out again. To try again. To attempt to understand what it was he wanted even when it settled itself around him.

And somehow, it seemed like Sonic *did* understand. “Yeah,” he said, smile honest. “It is. I mean, right now you’re seeing us on break. So, yunno, usually there’s a lot of school and baseball games and essays, but… for the most part? Yeah. This is it.”

“And you… like it?” There must have been a catch. Some kind of a foul secret they were hiding under it all. “Do you miss being on your own? Just living however you want?”

Sonic barked out a laugh loud enough to get Tom and Knuckles attention. When they went back to their conversation, Sonic tried again.

“Sorry. I just- *no.* That’s not even- *No. No way. No way ever in hell.”*

“Language.”

“Sorry, Dad.” Sonic sat back, and Shadow mirrored him, sinking into the couch. “When you showed up the first time, digging in the trash? It was hard to watch, dude.”

“Because you felt bad for me.”

“Because I did the same thing.”

Shadow had a vague notion that Sonic had been alone before. Tom hadn't revealed much, but he hadn't expected it to be that serious. Though it wasn’t as much of a shock to hear as Shadow thought it would be. Maybe because Sonic carried the same sort of exhausted, lonely look that Shadow saw on himself. It was hidden better under years of this new life. But it was there. Peeking out when Sonic forgot to tuck it away.

“I actually spent years outside of this house! Movie nights through the windows, stayed in their garage in the winter. I actually got pretty sick one year and let me tell you, it is not fun doing that on your own. I ended up stealing blankets they were going to donate and crashing in the garage for a whole week just to be close to them. It was my way of dealing with everything, yunno?”

Shadow did know. He’d spent his time in front of grainy TV screens and dancing to scratchy record music and staring at stars to make the rest of his existence just a little bit easier.

“Then one thing led to another and… here I am.” Pulling his knees to his chest, Sonic rested his chin against them and looked thoughtfully at Shadow. “Don’t tell my parents - and I’ll lie and deny it to the grave if you do - but the first time they said goodnight to me… I just didn’t know how to handle it. They said *goodnight, see you in the morning*, and that meant I’d get to do it all over again. Just see them the next day and the day after. Have people who love you and look out for you and *want* to do it again with you.” He smiled into his knees. “It’s weird when you start. Following rules, curfews, getting in trouble for things you always did before when no one cared. But it means someone cares. And I like having someone care.”

Shadow looked out over the room again, from Tom and Knuckles huddled over the phone, to Maddie handing out beers, to Tails and Stone engaged in animated conversation. Stone pulled his eyes away from the fox kit to accept the bottle Maddie was holding out and as he did he caught Shadow watching. His smile softened and he raised the bottle just slightly. “Huh.” The warm feeling was back in his stomach. He folded his hands over it. “I guess… that might be nice.”

“Eight-thirty.” Maddie tapped her watch.

At the coffee table, with blueprint paper spread out in front of him and white pencil in hand, Tails groaned. “Already?”

“‘Fraid so.”

“But we don’t have school tomorrow. I could just sleep later.”

“We both know that’s not gonna happen.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I know.” He laid the pencil down and looked at Stone. “Maybe we could work on this some more tomorrow?”

“I’d like that. Maybe on the kitchen table though, because sitting on the floor is starting to hurt my back.” He twisted, one way and then the other.

“Oh, yeah, sorry ‘bout that,” Tom said. “Knuckles, no more hogging the grown-up chairs.”

“Father, I am seventeen-”

“You’re not-”

“In two months I will be seventeen! In my tribe I would be taking the sacred oaths of manhood!”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. “And that has to do with the chair how?”

“You called it the ‘Grown Up’ chair.” Knuckles thumped the armrest with a fist. “In short order I shall be counted among the grown-ups! Therefore I am able to stake my claim upon this chair.”

Tom rolled his eyes in the direction of his wife. “You wanna help me out here, babe?”

Maddie looked up from sliding a rubber band around Tails’ rolled-up blueprints. “Knuckles, bus-seat rules apply for the chairs. You give ‘em to folks who need ‘em. Like people in their forties who can’t sit on the floor for hours.”

The echidna considered this, frowning. “Curse my peak physical form. Very well, Goat Milker. If your feeble, weak body requires the chair, then you shall have it.” He stood and bowed away.

“Thank you. That’s not insulting at all.” Stone grunted as he got to his feet. As he did, his gaze fell on the couch. “Think it might be bedtime for one more over here.”

Sonic bumped his arm against Shadow’s. “You fadin’ on us, buddy?”

Shadow startled, head jerking up. “I was awake!”

Maddie drew up beside the couch. “Your body needs plenty of rest to heal. If you’re ready to turn in, I can take you back upstairs. You do need one more round of pills before that, though, hang on.”

As she ducked away, Shadow dared a glance over at Sonic. “That’s not… lame?”

Sonic bumped him again. “Nah. When I have a fever I conk out early all the time.”

Maddie came back with the pills and a cup of water and he downed them quickly. Then she offered out her arms, and he raised his own.

She was careful with his leg - the cast was heavy and hurt if it dangled - and so wound up with her arms under his legs and around his shoulders.

“Night, Shadow.” Tom waved an arm, eyes on the television as he flicked through movie titles. Sonic muttered something similar under his breath while he leaned against Tom and Knuckles was too fixated on finding a comfortable position to sit on the floor to say much of anything at all.

From where he was positioned in Maddie’s arms, Shadow had the perfect angle to see the living room and to see Stone lift a hand and say, “Goodnight, kiddo.” It was so mundane. It shouldn’t have meant much. But when Stone added, “See you in the morning,” somehow it meant everything.

His stomach curled around the warmth that had been simmering all afternoon, and he kept his eyes on the man until they rounded the corner and he couldn't anymore. He wanted to bottle it up and hold it tight and never let it go, but this was the next best thing. So he memorized the fuzzy warmth and carried it with him all the way up the stairs.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> In which Shadow works to adjust to the Wachowski house and Stone's Sassy House wants to be included.

Between a hazy mix of drugs and exhaustion, Shadow did not wake up once during the night. Instead, he blinked awake to a hazy light on the ceiling. His leg was sore and beginning to ache, but Maddie had told him the night before to expect it. *We'll get you another dose tomorrow at 8,* she'd said, tucking the quilt around him, and wasn't that just amazing. Being told that he wouldn't need to be in pain while making sure he was warm and comfortable.

It was a luxury he wanted to stay in for as long as he was allowed

There was a little digital clock on the bedside table that told him it was quarter past 8. He sat up slowly and caught sight of something to his left. Peering over he saw, on the floor, an empty air mattress. It was neatly made with quilts and sheets, but there was enough of an indent on the pillow to know someone had been there earlier. Which meant he'd been out like a light while it had been set up.

And now that he thought about it, the room smelled different. Like the cologne that a certain former henchman used. Woodsy and dark and- something else?

If Shadow thought about it too long, he might have said it was notes of safety, maybe. But he didn't think about it for too long. Because that would have made his insides squirm and his eyes burn in all the worst ways.

Which they didn't.

At all.

Thankfully, he'd swiped away the absolutely not-there tears before the door to the bedroom opened and Stone crept in, a mug in his hand. Sometime between dinner and now he'd traded his suit for a pair of ill-fitting jeans and a Green Hills High School sweatshirt. It looked incredibly wrong somehow. Maybe it was the way it fell on him; shapelessly and wrinkled. Or maybe it was the way that he continued to glare down at himself, scowling at the sleeves and tugging at the hem with his free hand muttering something about *blends* and *Thomas* under his breath. When he noticed Shadow sitting up, he paused his creeping and smiled. "Hey! You're awake."

Shadow nodded.

"How are you feeling?"

"… sore?"

Stone laughed softly, sitting on the edge of Shadow's bed. The mattress dipped slightly. "Well, thankfully Doctor Maddie in all her infinite wisdom gave me the solution for that."

The mug had been for him, it turned out. Stone let him take the warm, honeyed tea and two pills from his hand.

"So here's what I'm thinking," said Stone when Shadow had taken the pills and was slowly drinking the rest of his tea. "Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. I've never really celebrated. I mean, I tried once with the Doctor, but… it wasn't really well received." He laughed. It came out sadder than he probably wanted. "But the Wachowskis are hosting some of their family, so it's going to be kind of crazy down there. Maddie and Tom have already been up since 6 cooking - well, she's cooking with my help and he's doing all the cutting. I've literally never seen that many chopped peppers. That man definitely wants to feel helpful. Thankfully a lot of what I stress cooked when you were out can double as appetizers so we're rolling with that."

Shadow stared at him, trying to process everything. "So… you need me?"

"God no. You and Tom are both on healing duty. The only reason that he's doing something is because he's spent the past few days on the couch and if he sits still for two more seconds, he's going to die of boredom and haunt the house just to have something to do. His words, not mine."

"Oh…" Shadow looked down and squeezed the mug between his hands, staring down at the bits of leaves floating against the bottom. He'd never been told to just sit before. He was made to be useful. To be used for something. Anything. "So. Then. What do I do?"

Stone's hand came into view and took the mug from Shadow's, setting it to the side. "How about, once we get down there, if you want to help out, we can find you something small to do. But this is what I wanted to tell you. The boys have been put onto *Shadow Duty*. Apparently they've got some good distractions for you. Movies, games, whatever they can do to keep you entertained between their own chores. But-" he added quickly, seeing Shadow shrink back, "I also know that it can be a lot. Don't know if you knew this, but I'm not exactly what you'd call a social butterfly. So I get needing time to recharge. De-people. So maybe, if you feel like that's what you need, we can come back here and we can pick a movie together. Or, hell, I'll just leave you on your own. Whatever you want."

The hedgehog startled at that. "Whatever *I* want?" he whispered, scared to say the words too loudly, like the fragility of *choice* might just break if he let it sit out in the open too long.

But Stone didn't snag it away or toss the idea over his shoulder. He just smiled and nodded and handed Shadow back his tea. "Yup. Totally your choice, kid."

It was like all the weight drifted off his shoulders and Shadow finally let out a long breath. He tried not to sound too relieved when he said, "Yeah. I'd be okay with that." The moment was only somewhat broken when Shadow looked Stone up and down and asked, "You look… comfortable?"

“I look off the rack. Good clothes don’t need to be expensive, you know.” He scowled down at the fabric and wrinkled his nose. “Just you wait. Thomas and I are going to be having *words*.”

“Shadow!” Knuckles was the first to spot Shadow when Stone helped to carry him down the stairs. “You are the strongest, smartest hedgehog I have ever encountered-”

Still in a long pajama shirt and face planted on the couch, Sonic barely even lifted his head to refute the statement.

“Father and Mother are working on creating the Charred Board of Many Cheeses and have put *me* onto breakfast duty. How would you like to learn how to flip the panned cakes? I know that your leg has stopped working, but I assume your wrists are not as feeble?”

“Wow,” said Tom, who was sitting at the kitchen island, carefully wrapping a brie wheel in thinly rolled dough. “Just no holding back, huh?”

From where she was cutting up strawberries at the counter, Maddie hung her head. “Knuckles, it’s not even nine…”

“It is *praise,* Mother! I did not even point out how absolutely disastrous he looks in the morning!”

Maddie looked moments away from dropping her head into the strawberries, but found the fortitude to at least smile at Shadow. “Morning, sweetheart. Pancakes alright?”

“We’re using my mom’s recipe,” said Tom. “I can’t promise it’ll be as good as hers, but we sure as hell can give it a try.” His attention turned to Stone and he beamed. “Hey! You see Stone, Knuckles? He’s repping your school.” The beam turned fully onto Stone. “How are you liking my rags? I told Maddie to hook you up with my comfiest pairs. I’ve got a few more sweatshirts on backup if you want, one for each of the kids’ stuff at this point.”

Stone looked about ready to go on a rant, and Shadow wasn’t really sure what to do about it, but thankfully Tails flew past them, sitting on the counter with blueberries in his hands. It was enough to stave off Stone’s *feelings*. At least for a little while. “We’ve got lots of toppings! I like whipped cream and berries. Sonic likes *plain* with syrup *on the side*.” He rolled his eyes, like he’d heard the order millions of times from the pickiest of his brothers, but even that was fond. “What do you like?”

Shadow wavered. Stone set him down onto the floor, kneeling to offer an arm for support. “Have you had them before?”

“I’ve seen them on TV?”

“They’re good,” said Stone. “Promise.”

“They will be *better than good*, as it is I who is making them!” Knuckles puffed out his chest. “I am the *best* at making panned cakes! Mother has taught me well in the ways of the kitchen

and-”

“Knuckles?”

“*Quiet*, Tails. I am regaling them with tales of my kitchen victories!”

“But-”

“ *You* are not King of the Kitchen! Do not interrupt!”

“Okay, well *King of the Kitchen*, your pancakes are on fire.”

Knuckles yelped, leaping into action with shouts of *why did you not tell me sooner*, beating the hellish pancake flat with a spatula while Tails rolled his eyes and flew over to land in front of Shadow. “He really is the best,” he whispered. “And honestly, his pancakes aren’t half bad either.” When Shadow merely hesitated, Tails gave his shoulder a soft punch. “And you can try my pancakes first if you want. Mine are the best way to eat them. But don’t tell Sonic I told you that.”

Pancakes were, absolutely, as good as Stone had promised. Better, probably.

Sonic had scoffed at his choice of toppings, proselytizing about the one true method of syrup and only syrup (with chocolate chips being the one exception), but gave up after Shadow had eaten two plates worth of blueberry pancakes and half a box of strawberries.

“I never got anything like this,” Shadow said almost reverently while Stone made him pause his eating long enough to wipe strawberry juice off his fingers.

“Well,” said Stone, handing him back his fork, “It sounds like we’ve got a new mission.”

Shadow cocked and eyebrow.

Stone tapped his phone on the table, waking it up. “We’ll call it ‘Operation: Shadow Tries Every Meal he’s Ever Wanted to Try but Couldn’t.” He opened a blank note screen. “Gimme some ideas to start.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. Gotta make up for lost time, right?”

It was like Stone could have told Shadow that he’d won the lottery the way the hedgehog looked up at him, wide eyes full of wonder and awe.

Tom and Maddie, sitting side by side, gave one another a look, tucking back into their own breakfasts when the kids turned their way.

Eventually, breakfast done, Sonic apparently was awake enough to spring into action. “Alright, Shadow. So, as the Czar of Fun around here, I’m happy to take you on the path

from lameness! What'll it be? We've got video games, movies, television-"

"I like Clue," said Maddie, helping collect plates and silverware with Stone.

Tails perked up. "Ooh! Board games!"

"What? No! Tails, *this* is why you aren't the Czar of Fun."

"Well neither are you, Sonic!"

"I passed out ballots weeks ago. Just because you all laughed at me and threw them away doesn't mean democracy stops."

"Boys," Maddie said, giving them both a look. She apparently noticed Shadow, who was looking more and more like a bug under an ever growing magnifying glass.

"Mom." Tails hung upside down off the couch, pout reversed. "We're not doing anything!"

Stone thankfully seemed to notice as well and swept in. "You know, I bet Shadow here would be one hell of a sous chopper. I know that I might need one."

It was a balm, hearing those words. "I can be helpful." He looked up at Stone and then towards Tom and his broken leg. "I want to be helpful."

"Well," said Maddie, ignoring the complaints of her two youngest kids. "I think people who volunteer to help get control of the stereo. What do you think, Tom?"

Tom, ignoring the now even louder complaints of his two *affronted* kids, beamed. "Oh. I think that'll work out just fine."

"Shadow, you are a *connoisseur* of the ears. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Shadow huffed, face hot, and continued chopping the walnuts. Stone had given him a knife and showed him how to use it after his attempts at stabbing had failed. "I don't know that many songs."

"But the songs you know are *good."* Tom pointed a teaspoon at Shadow and gave it a waggle. Olive oil dripped off and onto the counter next to the bowl where he was making salad dressing. "That's what counts."

From the speakers Maddie had set up on the counter, out of the way, the Partridge Family serenaded the Wachowskis about somebody who wanted to be wanted.

"I've got to agree with my husband on this one." Maddie sashayed past Tom, who reached out and nabbed her by the wrist. He was propped up on the counter and couldn't go far but somehow managed to give her a spin. She laughed and gave him a kiss for the effort.

"Ugh, do you see what you've done, Shadow." Sonic was helping to fold the good cloth napkins they stored away for special occasions. "You've made them *mushy*." But even he

seemed at least a little fond, as much as he tried to hide it behind another cloth napkin.

It was *all* so fond, actually; the family trading playful jibes without any real sharp edges, laughing over one another in time with the music.

Shadow watched, wondering what it would be like to be a part of something like that. It was sad in a way. Too many eyes on him and he froze up, and the reality of that -the realization that he could never have *this*- the realization that maybe GUN had taken some part of him, or broken some piece of him, just so they could fit more power somewhere, was heavy.

Stone's elbow broke him out of his reverie and he blinked up at the man. "You alright there?"

Shadow shrugged and went back to chopping walnuts.

"You sure? You're looking a little droopy."

"I'm a superweapon," he muttered. "Superweapons don't *droop*."

"Please. You're many things, Shadow. A good kid, a great walnut chopper, a future Hot Topic model. But superweapon you are not." Stone punctuated his point by flicking an olive at Shadow. It bounced off his nose. He retaliated by snatching a whole olive from Stone's uncut pile and shoving it into his mouth.

"I take it back," said Stone. "That was a superweapon move if I ever saw one."

It was all so silly. And his heart, which had been rapidly sinking, was buoying up again so quickly. He hardly had time to swallow the olive and duck his head before *it* slipped out.

Apparently *it* was enough to shock Stone. And from where he was organizing silverware, Sonic very nearly fell off his chair. He pointed at Shadow. "What was *that?"*

Shadow cleared his throat, then glanced down towards the shocked hedgehog. "What was what?"

"That noise! What was that noise! That just came out of your mouth!"

Tom pointed, this time with a salad fork. "I think that was a *laugh?"* The salad fork moved, this time to point at Stone. " *You*. *You* made *him laugh!"*

"*No*," Shadow mumbled. "It was a- an exclamation of surprise!"

"Yeah, 'cause I always go 'teehee' when *I'm* surprised," Sonic snarked at him across the island.

"I did not go 'teehee'." Shadow's brow started to crease, but stopped when Stone put a hand between his ears, scratching softly.

"Sure you didn't, kid," he said gently. "But it'd be okay if you did."

Shadow's muzzled scrunched, warming. He resumed chopping. "She used to say it was 'cute'. But superweapons aren't supposed to be 'cute'."

"Well. S'a good thing you're not a superweapon then." Stone resumed his own work as well.

Despite himself, the corner of Shadow's mouth ticked up.

Above their heads, Tom and Maddie shared another look.

The Wachowski house continued to be a flurry of activity; a perpetual hive of movement that was chaotic and practiced all at once. And it should have been overwhelming. It *was* overwhelming.

Thankfully, whenever Shadow felt the urge to sink through the floor and curl up somewhere near the center of the earth, Stone just sort of seemed to know. He'd just crouch down and look right at Shadow and say;

"Yunno, I think I could use a breath or fresh air. You want to come out onto the porch with me?"

or

"Can you tell me if this needs a pinch more salt?"

or

"How about we choose a new album to play. My 70's knowledge is… not the grooviest."

Stone was a buoy in a frantic storm of Thanksgiving prep, and Shadow found that he couldn't help but hold tight.

He just wished he could have done the same for Stone.

"They look…fine." It was the best he could offer the man, who was looking more and more melty by the minute as he surveyed the eldest Wachowski's closet. Stone had gently expressed to Maddie that he wasn't comfortable leaving Shadow for too long, but didn't feel like he had the appropriate armor to battle through a Thanksgiving meal.

To which Maddie replied cheerfully that Tom had plenty of suits that he could try on.

Which led Stone to the room, in front of the closet, with Shadow electing to join him away from the Wachowski storm below.

Stone took one of the suit jackets with his fingertips and dropped it onto the bed like an especially soggy used tissue. He gave it a poke. "I've done so many demeaning things in my time." He wiped his hands off on his pants. "I will *not* wear a suit made of a *rayon blend."*

"Is it… I mean, you could just… not wear it?" Shadow mimicked him, poking at the tan jacket. "This house doesn't seem like an especially *formal* place."

Stone sighed, turning to frown at the closet again. “I’m certain that Tom will be in jeans and flannel tomorrow, but that’s not- That’s not a look I can pull off.”

“Sure you-”

“Comfortably, anyway,” he amended. He tugged at the collar of his borrowed sweatshirt. “I don’t know how to explain this without sounding like a whiny- It’s like your rings.” He turned once more to face the bed.

“My rings?” Shadow’s right hand immediately landed on the cuff around his left wrist.

“Not literally, but metaphorically. I don’t feel right if I don’t look a certain way. I never got much respect when I was young. I went from job to job. But the first time I put on a good suit? Suddenly I’m getting respect. Admiration. People took me seriously. It was an armor. Now it’s just a point of pride.” He gestured at the sweatshirt and jeans. “But in this? I’m a mess. Inside *and* out. I just wish I’d thought to pack anything at all before we left. There’s a whole walk-in closet *full* of *beautiful,* ***perfect*** suits back at the house. But it’s not like they’re going to sprout wings and come sailing in the window.”

Shadow picked at the tan fabric again. “You could go.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not *that* far, really. I’d be okay for however long it took.”

“Shadow…”

The hedgehog raised his eyes, a shy smile on his lips. “Go on. Go get your armor. I promise I won’t go anywhere.”

Something welled up inside Stone’s chest and he pressed his lips tight to keep whatever it was from spilling out. He nodded silently, waiting for it to recede. It did, at least a little. Enough for him to reach out and ruffle the fur between Shadow’s ears. His hand lingered. “I’ll hold you to that, kiddo.” And then, because it felt like his hand had lingered *too* long, he tweaked one ear as he pulled away.

Shadow ducked his head as a tiny *teehee* slipped out.

Unnoticed by either of them, turned face down on the bed, Stone’s phone blinked with the words ‘REQUEST RECEIVED’.

Inside Stone’s House, the TV flickered to life.

In 4:3, a three-year-old Olsen twin gave a thumbs up and recited their catchphrase, *“You got it, dude!*”

A panel opened up on the ceiling as the laugh track played, and half a dozen miniature Eggdrones filed out. In an orderly line, they flew to the walk-in closet. In an orderly line,

they each attached themselves to a hanger. In an orderly line, they flew out the opening door and into the bright November afternoon.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

> In which Green Hills is invaded, Knuckles sees a ghost, and a House is made travel sized (for your inconvenience!).

Chapter Notes

> We can't even begin to tell you how many commenters were predicting the beginning of this chapter. Enjoy the chaos you so desire.

Wade wasn’t exactly excited about working the day before Thanksgiving. But Tom had won the day off fair and square (half because of his whole broken body situation, and half because he’d won rock-paper-scissors, even though he was convinced the man had cheated somehow) which meant that Wade was the one sitting in the sheriff's office with the volunteer staff, responding to calls about fried-turkey fires and distant-relative-induced road rage.

There was one bright spot in his day, though.

“I’m off on my break, Stan.” Wade unclipped his badge, saluting the volunteer manning the phones. “Be back in an hour.”

Stan ran a coffee shop a few doors down and had heard enough early morning poetic rambles from Wade when he picked up coffee. He winked. “Have fun picking up the missus!”

“Not quite there yet, Stan.”

“She’s moving here though, isn’t she?”

“She’s moving here to be closer to *family*.”

Stan gave Wade a look. “Whatever you say, dude.”

Wade rolled his eyes. It didn’t stop him from smiling all the way to his car.

Rachel had announced the move just a few months ago. San Francisco was too expensive and too loud and too lonely, and so after many a talk with her sister and her long distance

boyfriend, Rachel had made the decision that the best thing for her and Jojo would be Green Hills.

“Bring a few things with you over Thanksgiving,” Maddie had told her sister. “It’ll be a slow process. Might as well find a way to speed it up a little. And we can store them here until you close on the house.”

And when she’d told Wade about that part of the plan, Wade had jumped at the opportunity to pick her up at the airport.

Which was where he was heading at that moment, stuck in pre-Thanksgiving traffic. The highway towards the airport was clogged with cars, all of them beeping, shouting, cursing, but somehow Wade couldn’t care less. He drummed his fingers and hummed along to the song on the radio, waving cheerfully at someone next to him. They flipped him off.

He gave them a thumbs down and went back to humming.

The Thanksgiving shift was the worst, yes. But Rachel was fifteen minutes from being next to him, so what did it matter? Soon enough he’d be holding her hand over the gearshift and trying every joke in his repertoire to make Jojo laugh.

Nothing could bring him down.

Absolutely *nothing*.

His phone rang and he turned down the radio, accepting the call. “Hey there, beautiful! How’s my special lady?”

“THE SUITS ARE INVADING!”

Wade nearly skidded out of his lane. He waved guiltily towards the cars on either side of him. “*Carl!?”*

“I seen’um, Deputy! Sleeves flappin’ and leggies all over, like ghosts in the sky!”

“Carl, I told you, if those condors are back, you’ve got to call the parks service-”

“These ain’t no *condors,* Lover Boy! I seen’um with my own eyes! Took out my binoculars, even! The Goopy and the Armany and the- the Blueberry!”

“*What?”*

“Ain’t you listening to me!? *Fine, I-Talian suits are coming for us! You gotta warn everyone!”*

Wade turned onto his exit. The airport was just in sight. He sighed. “Listen, Carl. I’ve got to go. Whatever it is, we can deal with it *tomorrow*.”

“But-!”

“Goodbye, Carl.” He hung up before Carl could keep going.

Carl was a sweet man. He was smart and kind, but occasionally he waged war with families of raccoons or set up traps for blue devils.

Which… on second thought, he’d been right about the latter.

But still.

He didn’t have time to second guess any further because he was pulling into the ‘arrival’ lane at the airport and he could already see Rachel and Jojo waving at him from the curb. In between hugs and hellos and loading their suitcases in the bed of the truck, Carl’s Great Suit Invasion slipped to the back of his mind.

Where it would stay until they were halfway back to town, and his phone rang again.

“Hey Thad,” he put the park ranger on speakerphone. “What’s up? Another coyote get too close to Jenkin’s south field again?”

“Uh, no.” There was a shuffling on the other end of the line, and a muffled yelp. “It’s, uh, somethin’ else.”

“Don’t leave me in suspense, Thad.”

“Well, it’s uh-” Thad started to say, but then another voice entered the call.

“There’s some kinda fancy suit stuck in a tree!” Andy, a first-year recruit, sounded panicked. “And we can’t get it down ‘cause there’s, like, an attack drone guarding it?”

Rachel swiveled to look at the phone. “A what now?”

Wade blew out a breath. “Dammit, guess I owe Carl an apology bagel. What’s the drone look like, Andy?”

“It’s the strangest lil’ thing. Looks like an egg!”

“Yup. I figured.”

Rachel quirked an eyebrow at him.

“We’ve got some catching up to do,” he told her, before addressing the rangers again. “Send me the coordinates, guys. And then leave it be. I’ll take care of it.” He hung up and then asked Rachel, “Call your sister for me, will ya?”

The Wachowski house was quiet. Mother had realized they didn’t have cranberries, so she had taken Sonic and Tails out for a last-minute grocery-store trip. Father was napping on the living room couch. The Goat Milker and More Formidable Hedgehog were in Tom and Maddie’s room, doing something with the wardrobe.

Knuckles had been left with no instructions other than to leave the door unlocked for a neighbor of his grandparent's to drop the dog back off, and to let Father rest, so he'd gone to his basement room to find something to occupy his time.

He'd texted Zoe, but her entire clan was gathering and she had familial obligations.

So he did what he always did when he was bored.

He trained.

The task he'd given himself that day was to see how quietly he could use the weight machine, raising and lowering the heavy stack of iron without it clanking and waking Father. It was proving to be a rather excellent challenge, as his muscles burned pleasantly with each slow, deliberate movement. Sweat clumped his fur as he counted off repetitions in his head. At some point, he heard a car pull up and a door open. He'd paused at that to listen, but relaxed after he heard Ozzie bounding into the kitchen for his water bowl.

'Forty-seven… forty-eight…'

On the floor above him, he heard the clack of Ozzie's claws on the hardwood.

'Forty-nine… fifty…'

Ozzie barked once.

Probably scolding a squirrel that was sneaking up to the bird feeder.

'Fifty-one…fifty-two…'

In his peripheral vision, a shadow swept past the small window to his left.

He froze mid-rep, muscles straining, and turned towards the window.

Dead and dried leaves rustled against the pane.

Of course. The wind.

'Fifty-three-'

A second shadow, and Ozzie barked again.

He nearly lost his grip on the hand-holds, catching them just before the weights crashed back into place. He eased them down and rose from the bench, peering at the window.

A *third* shadow! It moved by in a flash but he could've sworn it looked like trouser legs.

Ozzie's barking grew more agitated.

Hackles rising, he moved deliberately for the stairs. If someone thought they could prey upon his tribe, they were about to learn an incredibly painful lesson.

He kept his footsteps quiet. Ozzie, however, had never understood the concept of stealth. The hound was darting from room to room, barking at the windows and whining.

Knuckles caught him by the collar as he got to the top of the steps, giving the dog's head a scratch. "Quiet," he whispered. Ozzie whined, but did at least stop barking, leaning into Knuckles' side. "Do not worry. I will see to the problem."

He crept through the kitchen, fists raised.

When a shadow passed the window above the sink, he turned around. "Who is there?" Creeping closer, he climbed onto the kitchen counter to peer out, searching for whoever was prowling around the house.

For a moment, there was nothing. Just the trees and a few birds perched on top of the little shed out back.

When the blurry shape shot past, he toppled off the counter with a yelp. " *Impossible!"* he squeaked. "It is not possible!"

But he knew what he'd seen.

The shape of a man floating across the backyard, circling the house.

This was no ordinary intruder.

Tears pricked his eyes, and his heart jammed itself into his throat. He backed away from the window, eyes flickering all around. The house suddenly seemed too big. Too infinite and unprotected. "I told them!" he said as Ozzie whined at his side. "I told Tails to invest in ghost wards. I *told them!"*

But they'd just told him ghosts weren't real.

But Knuckles knew better. Ghosts were real. And they were the only thing he couldn't protect his family from.

After all, he'd never be able to punch a ghost.

A sound caught his attention, and his eyes slowly shifted towards the back door. The handle was jiggling, squeaking softly as it did its best to turn. Knuckles held his breath, watching as the handle turned. Slowly. Slowly. *So slowly.*

And then the door was swinging open with a creak.

Knuckles wanted to run. He wanted to curl into a ball. He wanted to jump off the earth and into space.

But he was the family's protector. And he would go down fighting for them.

The door finally opened with one last *creak* and the shape of the floating, *headless* man was finally revealed.

Knuckles steeled himself with a breath. Tears pooled in his eyes. “This may be the end for me, old friend,” he told Ozzie. “Tell Mother that I love her.”

And then, with a scream, he launched himself at the ghost.

Everything was a blur of fists and electricity and fabric covering his eyes. He shrieked, tearing and clawing and biting. Ozzie was snarling at his side, tugging at the ghost’s legs. “BEGONE FOUL SPIRIT! RETURN TO THE DEPTHS OF HELL FROM WHENCE YOU CAME!” Knuckles sobbed through a mouthful of fabric.

And then suddenly the ghost was gone. Or, rather, it was ripped away.

Stone stood in the kitchen. He held the ghost in his hands. He stared up at Knuckles and gave the ghost a shake. *“What are you doing with my suit!”*

Behind them, a second flying suit hit the window and started to flail like a moth. It bounced against the glass with little *bonk bonk bonk*s.

Stone opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. From his pocket, his phone lit up. The Rock began to croon *You’re Welcome.*

“So, I just want to make sure I totally understand.” Maddie was standing on the porch with the rest of her family (sans Knuckles, who had retreated to his room to lick his wounded pride), Stone, and Shadow, watching Tails try to dislodge an Armani suit currently doing its best impression of a car lot inflatable against the gutters. “Your… house did this?”

“Yes,” seethed Stone.

“Because you asked it to?”

“Apparently it was listening and decided to do this on its own.”

“That’s not creepy at all,” mumbled Tom, staring at Stone’s phone and taking a step away.

Maddie nodded, processing. “So. It’s a smart house?”

“No,” said Stone. “It’s a bitch.”

Still stuck in the gutters, the tiny drone was apparently taking Tails’ assistance personally and was bonking him on the head. “Mom! It won’t *stop!”*

Stone glared at the drone. “Stop hitting children!” he snapped, lifting his phone and glaring at the black screen. “I hope you’re listening! You’re not a smart house. You’re the stupidest house in the history of real estate.”

The phone lit up, and its tinny speakers blasted heavy metal at him. *‘You call me a bitch like it’s a bad thing!’*

He hurriedly muted it. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize it would *follow* me here.”

Leaning on the small crutch Tails had made for him, Shadow looked up at the phone. “It has a funny idea of what ‘being helpful’ is.”

Tails, with the successfully-extricated suit in hand, floated back down to the porch. “It sounds like a really advanced AI. It must have downloaded a version of itself to your phone somehow. Did you charge it in a built-in USB outlet?”

“No, I-” Stone blinked, and then frowned. “I did.”

The phone unmuted itself, so that Fleetwood Mac could tell him, *‘I wanna be with you everywhere!’*

“Goddamit, shut up!” he muted it again, color flooding his face. “I didn’t ask for this!”

Maddie patted his shoulder and then craned her neck to survey the yard. “Did we miss any of them?”

“One sec.” Sonic vanished in a blur of blue, only to reappear instantly, another pine-needle-laden suit in his arms. There was what looked like the beginnings of a bird nest in the breast pocket. “Just this last one that Wade had called about up in the woods.”

“Great. Why don’t we go inside then, hm? I’ve got cranberry sauce to make.”

“Sounds like a blast,” Sonic said. Then he nudged Shadow ever-so-gently. “You wanna play video games or something? Or we could put on a scary movie to torment Knux.”

“Don’t you dare,” Maddie said as they all filed back into the house.

“I was kidding, Mom! So, Shads, video games?”

“Is that…like Pong?” Shadow asked.

“Like *what*?”

“Might wanna start him on the old NES, bud,” Tom said.

“Good call, Dad. C’mon dude, your destiny of guiding a tiny plumber through a world of mushrooms awaits!”

"I think I heard a dog, though-"

"Oh, yeah, you remember Ozzie! I'll let you give him a cheese stick. You need to meet him when there's not chaos everywhere. He's not scary, I promise. And hey, if you smear peanut butter on Knuckles' quills, sometimes Ozzie'll knock him over, *not that I've ever done that, Mother-"*

Maddie snorted and smiled to herself, watching as the pair of hedgehogs broke from the group, heading for the living room while the rest of them went into the kitchen. “Tails, think you could help Mr. Stone de-AI his phone?”

“I dunno, Mom. I could try.” He looked up at Stone. “Is it your program?”

Stone shook his head. “It’s Iv- it’s the Doctor’s. It… came with the House.” He handed the phone to the fox kit.

“Fascinating.” Tails’ eyes were bright as he turned it over in his hands. “I wonder if I can get it to move to my computer, or make another copy of itself. I’d love to get a good look at the code!”

“Maybe let’s not?” Tom said. “There’s a reason we don’t have an Alexa.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. I’ll put it in a virtual box. I won’t let it into my *actual* computer.” He leaned towards Stone. “We like to keep our house dumb.”

“Good move,” said Stone, nodding approvingly.

As the group migrated together into the kitchen, Tom eased himself into a stool at the island. “Dunno what that means, but I trust that I won’t be getting Eggdrone deliveries every time I see a Taco Bell commercial.”

“I swear,” Stone groaned. “At first I thought there were just some automated features. Motion-sensor lights. The security system. But this-” He gestured at the phone in Tails’ hands. “-is way more advanced than anything I’ve seen before. I mean, the Doctor’s stuff was advanced. But whatever *this* is? He must have been working on it in secret longer than any of his other projects.”

Tails flew up to sit beside his father, holding up the phone. “It has an interesting way of communicating. Most of the large language learning models the humans are working on mimic conversation. But this doesn’t seem to have that capacity. At least not yet.” He tapped the screen, but it stayed locked. He slid it across the island in Stone’s direction.

Tom popped a chunk of stuffing into his mouth. “In English, bud.”

“AI learns how to talk like a human by mimicking back information it’s given. It’s limited to what people put into its system. Data. Facts. Stuff like that.” Tails brought out his own phone, bringing up a website. “That’s why if I asked it the plot of a movie, it could tell me the whole thing. But if I asked it to tell me what it *thought* about that movie-”

“It couldn’t tell you,” said Tom. “Because it doesn’t have emotions?”

“Exactly.” Tails peeked over towards the phone. “And it *definitely* couldn’t tell you to go away if it didn’t like your question.”

Frowning, Stone leaned over the screen. “I know you can hear us. Wake up.”

The phone blinked to life, displaying a video clip of *My Neighbor Totoro*, the namesake character snoring soundly.

“Or do *that*,” said Tails, barely trying to hide his awe as he stared at the belligerent piece of tech creatively mocking its owner.

“Cute.” With a roll of his eyes, Stone went to lay out the suits he’d collected on the dining table. Five out of six were salvageable. A little dry cleaning, a few small seam repairs, and they’d be good as new. The sixth, however…

It still hurt to look at the sixth.

Honestly, it was a minor miracle it was still recognizable *as* a suit . He’d gotten it away from Knuckles before the boy had gotten to use his full power, thank goodness. So no chaos-energy burns. But those protrusions on his fists had turned the thing into swiss cheese and that was before the dog had gotten in on the action.

Maddie glanced over towards him, eyeing the shredded fabric. “I sort of get why you were glaring at my husband’s suit now.” She reached out, hand hovering, and glanced at him to wait for permission.

He sighed and held it out, letting her run her hand along the bits of destroyed soft cotton. The silk lining was hanging out. Like guts he thought, mournfully.

“This is beautiful.”

“It *was* beautiful.” He glowered down at the ruined suit.

“Where did you even *get* all these?” She looked over the others that she could see, settling around the house. “If I knew being a henchman paid this well, I’d have done it years ago.”

That at least got a laugh out of him. “I mean, before I ended up here, a lot of the suits I got were second hand. I just got them under a sewing machine until they looked better than new. Some of them aren’t even a brand, per say. I just found the fabric and liked it enough to make something. *These* suits though…” He swallowed. “These came with the house.”

“The smart house?”

He nodded. “The house *he* built me.”

Behind Maddie, Tom took a sharp breath. “Well, shit.”

“Yeah.”

Maddie sighed. She ran her hand along the fabric again. “You know,” she mused, “the boys are going to complain like crazy tomorrow. We always put them in suits for Thanksgiving. Mostly because Rosie and Big T, those are Tom’s parents, like to take pictures. They take them off right after that, but it’s a *struggle.* ” She shook her head fondly before smiling at Stone. “Anyway, I took a look at Sonic’s last night while he wasn’t looking. It’s got a hole in the back of the jacket from a quill or something. Is there any way…?”

“You want me to patch it?”

“If you don’t mind?”

She was looking at him so hopefully, with so much open admiration over a skill that he hadn't ever considered to be even remotely interesting. Most of the time, it had been ordered out of him.

Fix this, make that, wrong colors.

It was strange, being *asked*.

Like it was more than just a *skill*.

Goddamned Wachowskis. Making him feel *important*.

Terrible , he thought, fighting back a smile. *The worst.*

"Yeah. I think I can do that. Just get me his suit. I'll take a look at it."

Her shoulders slumped and she clasped her hands together with a *thank you thank you thank you*.

While she ran off to the laundry room, he ran his fingers along the lapel of the swiss cheese suit in his hands, mourning the lovely red accents against the deep, charcoal grey. Almost the same colors as-

"Here it is!" Maddie was back, holding the suit over her arm, using the other to poke Tails in the side, making him laugh. She cast him with a dramatic glare. "Dont you dare tell your brother about this. He thinks he's getting out of this suit thing. I don't need him getting *ideas*."

He wiggled free from his mother's torture. "I won't!"

"Promise?"

"*Promise."*

"Good." And then she held out the suit, jacket in one hand, pants in the other. "It doesn't need anything else. It's the right size and everything. It's just the holes."

He looked at Sonic's suit.

He paused.

"Stone?" Maddie gave the suit a shake. "You alright?"

An idea percolating, he gathered it all up, nabbing the jacket and pants from her hands, laying it over his designer roadkill. "Do you need me right now?"

Maddie blinked, but shook her head. "Nah. Tails?"

Her youngest son was already hopping down from his stool, Stone's phone in hand. "Nope. I'm gonna borrow this for a little, okay?"

“By all means,” he said over the bundle of garments in his arms. “See if you can get it to be less of a pain in the ass.”

The fox snickered. “No promises there.”

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Sonic discovers something about his new friend's voice and Shadow deals with nightmares.

Chapter Notes

A shorter chapter to bring you into the weekend!

Enjoy the cliffhanger, you hellions.

Shadow, as it turned out, liked Nintendo games. They were challenging in an interesting way, and distracted him from the lingering pain in his ankle, and made the time pass quickly.

He also, as it turned out, liked Sonic.

He'd been so sure the blue hedgehog would get on his nerves, with his high-energy, non-stop chatter and references Shadow didn't get. Not that he didn't know that Sonic was a good person. Even good people could rub you the wrong way. But Shadow found, to his great surprise, that when they weren't fundamentally at odds. Sonic filled the silence when Shadow didn't know what to say. He teased but in a way that didn't sting. He somehow knew exactly the right place to sit; not too close but not too far.

And so they passed a pleasant afternoon on the couch, while the rest of the house went on with business without them. Eventually a paper plate with a slice of pizza on it was placed in each of their hands and the Wachowskis and Stone joined them for another Bruce Lee movie.

As much as he enjoyed the film (the genre has always been one of his favorites), he found himself watching the hedgehog beside him more than the action on screen. As Sonic mimicked a series of strikes with the crust of his second slice, he found himself saying, "I could teach you that move."

"Hm?" Sonic stopped mid-chop to turn and look at him.

With those green eyes on him, Shadow felt his muzzle warm inexplicably. "Well. I mean, when I've healed I could. At the base I, uh, I studied martial arts."

“Hold up!” Sonic was suddenly leaning forward on hands and knees, nose inches from Shadow’s. “You’re telling me you know kung-fu?”

Shadow swallowed. “I know kung-fu.”

Sonic startled. He opened his mouth, searching for the right words before blurting out; “Say that again.”

“...why?”

“Just do it, dude.”

Shadow cleared his throat. “I know kung-fu?”

“No, no, no, say it like you’re a badass.”

From the end of the couch, Tom poked his son in the back. “Shh.”

“Dad! Are you *hearing this?”*

“I can’t hear the movie if that’s what you’re asking.”

“In a sec, Dad. Just listen to this first! ” Sonic’s eyes didn’t leave Shadow’s face. “One more time, dude.”

Muzzle burning, Shadow tried to work his expression into something resembling ‘badass’. “I know kung-fu.”

Sonic rolled back onto his tail, both fists at his chin. “Holy crap, you sound *just* like him!” He glanced over his shoulder towards Tom. “You hear that, right? It’s a dead ringer!”

“No, but I’d like to hear the *movie* , if it’s all the same to you.”

“How can you not *hear* that! He sounds exactly like him!”

Shadow’s expression slipped from ‘badass’ back to ‘shy confusion’. “Like who?”

“Oh, only the *best* actor of *all* time,” Sonic said, ignoring his dad’s continued pokes and shushes. “Just you wait. When the holiday’s over, we *gotta* watch *The Matrix* .”

The rest of the night went smoothly enough. Sonic might have disagreed, Shadow thought. But that was probably because no one else in the family thought he sounded like whoever it was, no matter how much Sonic insisted he did.

Apparently not even Stone seemed to hear it as he took a seat in his chair, fabric in his hands. He was picking apart stitches with a little scissor, cutting away errant bits of string. “He just sounds like Shadow to me,” was all he said, and gave said hedgehog a wink.

They finished the pizza and the movie. A woman named Rachel called at one point and Maddie put her on speakerphone so she and a kid named Jojo could talk to the three Wachowski boys.

“That’s our aunt,” Tails whispered to Shadow at some point, padding over to stand next to the couch beside Shadow. He still had Stone’s phone in his hand. It was muted, but the screen was playing a continuous loop of M. C. Hammer chanting *can’t touch this.*

“Your… *aunt?”*

“Yeah, an aunt is-”

“I know what an aunt is,” Shadow hissed back, trying not to sound as small as he felt. He looked around the room, at Sonic and beside him on the couch, now curled up against Tom, who was running his fingers through Sonic’s quills, untangling the ones that were twisted together. Knuckles was on the floor next to Maddie, lying with his head on her shins and dozing off. “I just- you have an *aunt* .”

“Yeah. And a cousin. That’s Jojo. They’re staying with Aunt Rachel’s boyfriend right now, though. You’ll meet them tomorrow at Thanksgiving.”

“Oh.” Shadow continued to look around the room at the family. His eyes landed on Stone and he quickly looked away.

When his stomach twisted up seeing them all together, he blamed it on the rainbow of tablets and pills and capsules Stone passed his way after dinner with a glass of water.

It was easier that way. To blame it on a pill when he saw Maddie doing a double take between the time, taking an exhausted Tails up to bed in her arms. When she came back down to send her other two to their own beds.

When Sonic got up, but was stopped by Tom with a “Sorry, did you pay the toll?”

Which apparently meant a hug from both of his parents.

Definitely the pill, Shadow reasoned. That was the only explanation for feeling like he could have sunken into the Earth.

He hardly noticed when Sonic tapped his knee with a *‘night, dude’* . He also didn’t notice the adults moving around until one of them was kneeling in front of him.

“Shadow?” Stone’s voice brought his face into focus. “You want to try the stairs on your own?”

His eyes darted to his crutch, propped up against the arm of the sofa. He probably *could* manage it. It would hurt, maybe. Probably. And no one would judge him (probably) if he tipped forward onto his face. But he still probably *should* try. He probably-

“Or-” Stone’s voice brought his attention back around again. “-would you rather I take you up?”

All the tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding in his body relaxed in a rush as he sighed out, "Yes, please," and held out his arms.

And then strong arms were hoisting him up and as his nose brushed against a lapel he caught the scent of coffee and cumin and *safety* . He tucked his face into the fabric and knew that the pill wasn't to blame for the lump in his throat.

Shadow didn't see Maddie and Tom watching them. Watching Stone's arms hold tighter than he had to, Shadow's face pressed into his shoulder, Stone's against the top of Shadow's head.

They turned and looked towards one another.

"Hm," said Maddie, forehead creased.

"Hm," agreed Tom.

Shadow was running.

Running for his life, down a cold, white hall, while orange lights flashed and alarms blared.

To his left, his sister was holding his hand, running in stocking feet beside him.

To his right-

Wait.

No one had been holding his right hand. The Professor had been leading them, holding onto Maria. But the old man wasn't there. Instead, to his right-

Orange light illuminated the grim features of the man called Stone.

Shadow stumbled in surprise, but Stone kept the hold on his hand firm, keeping him moving. He looked to Maria, but her expression was the same as he remembered, frightened and confused. But where was-

*" **SHADOOOW!!** "*

The Professor's voice boomed, echoing off the walls and bombarding them from all sides.

He twisted his neck. Behind them, Gerald Robotnik was leading a squadron of G.U.N. soldiers. He was dressed in the suit he'd worn on the Eclipse Canon, and he was running, not on his own two legs, but rather propelled forward by mechanical crab legs protruding from his belt.

The soldiers' feet pounded against the concrete of the base, bathed in the pulsing orange light. Gunshots echoed off the walls, loud enough to make his ears ring. Loud enough to rattle his bones. Loud enough that he almost didn't feel the hands slipping out of his until they were already gone. It was bursts of light and noise and screams and he whirled around trying to

find Maria and Stone, but no matter how loudly he called their names, his voice couldn't compete with the blasts of the alarm and the weapons of the soldiers behind them.

It wasn't until the blasts stopped that he saw them.

Or… what was *left* of them.

Charred, motionless bodies, facedown on the floor, fire all around them.

The scream that rose up was choked off by a cable cinching tight around his throat, and he was yanked backwards. He fought to right himself, but was thrown to the ground again and again. He tried to summon up his power, but he couldn't feel it within him. And that was when he noticed it, crackling red, traveling along the cable from his neck, up, up, up, to a canister in Gerald's hands. The Professor's eyes were cold as he stared down at Shadow. "Stupid little fool," he spat. "Did you ever think you were worth more than what we could take from you?"

Shadow couldn't speak. Couldn't scream. Couldn't breathe. All he could do was twist in the direction of the bodies, shaking hands grasping at air.

"Look what you've done."

"... what? "

The word was so small, so choked.

No. No, he hadn't- It was-

"An accident?" Gerald huffed out a laugh. "It was *your* Chaos Energy that powered their weapons. Chaos Energy in the cannisters that exploded. Chaos Energy that you let us harvest."

"But I-"

"Trusted me? Yes, and what a mistake *that* was, wasn't it?" Gerald gave the catchpole a tug, jerking Shadow closer. "Look where it got you. Look where it got *them* ." One metallic crab claw gestured at the bodies.

Shadow couldn't look at them. But a gloved hand gripped his quills hard, forcing him to raise his head.

"I bet they're regretting trusting *you* right about now. Let's ask them, hmm?"

With growing horror, Shadow had to watch as the corpses rose up, jerkily, like marionettes, and turned their grey, bloodied faces in his direction. Their eyes, milky white, stared unblinking.

"...yOu'Re fAuLt, sHadOw…" Maria gurgled, black bile dribbling down her chin and spattering her nightgown.

Beside her, Stone's head lolled to one side, his jaw unhinged and hanging slack. "...cAn'T tRusT a lIviNg wEapOn…"

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. He could only watch them until it got too hard to see through the tears. "I'm sorry!" he choked. "I'm so sorry!"

"Maybe if you'd just stayed in your cell, where you belong, they'd both still be here." Gerald's breath was hot against the side of his head. He smelled like fire and ash. "Maybe you should have remembered what you are."

There were more shots and screams. Fire was rising up the walls, swallowing the bodies of Maria and Stone. Beside him, Gerald was laughing as a black hole opened up in the floor. The cable around Shadow's neck morphed, becoming an arm of the flames, dragging him down towards it. In one last attempt at *something* , Shadow reached his hand upwards.

He could hear his own voice rattling around them in time with the inferno. *You told me I could be anything,* he pleaded towards Maria. And to Stone; *You said you'd protect me. Remember? You promised!*

Maria and Stone both watched as he was dragged farther down. Neither of them reached out.

"mOnSteR," Maria hissed.

"wEaPOn," Stone snarled.

And when Shadow sank through the floor into the dark nothing below, Maria and Stone's eyes followed until they blinked away, and all Shadow was left with was a starless sky.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

In which Shadow awakens from his nightmare.

"*No! No,* ***please!****"* Shadow screamed at the dark, flailed at the tangle of flames that held him. "Don't leave me a-"

PHWUMP!

Shadow landed on something soft and unstable and he jolted awake.

"Shadow! Shadow, it's okay!"

Hands were on his shoulders, and he thrashed, and then there was a face in front of his in the dark. A face that had been broken and bloody and dead-eyed. A face that was now whole, and real, and *afraid*.

"S-Stone?" It was a shock to see brown eyes instead of white. Such an overwhelming relief, that without thinking, he lunged forward. The cast on his leg dragged painfully, but he couldn't have cared less. He collided with Stone's chest, knocking them both sideways off of the air mattress. But Stone caught him, caught him up in arms that held fast. Caught him and didn't let go.

"Easy, kid, easy." His voice was soft and soothing. "You're alright."

"My f-fault." Shadow's breath hitched and stuttered. "All my fault."

"What's your fault?"

He couldn't say it.

He *couldn't*.

If he said it, then that would make it more true than it already was.

Stone brought a hand to his head, running it down his quills over and over.

"Maria." The word slipped out with fresh tears. "She's dead because of *me*."

"What? Where did you- Did someone say that to you?"

Shadow shook his head against Stone's chest. Tears smeared the fabric. "Doesn't matter. It's *true*."

“Shadow-”

“I’m a *weapon*. That’s all I am. All I do is hurt people!”

“*Shadow.”* Shadow nearly cried out when Stone pulled away. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head back and forth, back and forth. *I told you. No one should be near me. I’m a weapon. I’m a weapon. I’m a-* “Shadow, you need to *breathe.*” There were hands grabbing his until one of them touched what felt like a sturdy and warm wall. Something beat softly against his palm, the wall lifting up and down.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw his hand again, pressed to Stone’s chest, trapped beneath the man’s hand. Stone was breathing in and out slowly. There was fear in his eyes. And a heavy concern.

And, to Shadow’s surprise, sadness.

Shadow’s breath slowed to try and match Stone’s as best as he could. He followed along with the gentle up and down until Stone let his hand go and reached out hesitantly. Shadow didn’t waste any time curling up against Stone.

“It was a dream.” Stone’s chest rumbled when he talked. His chin was a secure weight against the top of Shadow’s head. “It was just a dream.”

Shadow shook his head. “I couldn’t stop them. When the base was stormed… He told us to run, so we ran. But I should’ve- I could’ve fought them- I could’ve teleported us- I didn’t even *try*. ” He sniffled, wiping at his face. It didn’t do much. “ It was *me* they wanted. If I’d just given myself up- If I’d never spent any time with her, maybe-”

“You can’t think like that, kiddo. You just- it’ll drive you crazy.”

“But-”

“But nothing. I didn’t know Maria. But I know if you two hadn’t found each other, she wouldn’t have been as happy as I know she must’ve been.” Stone rocked them back and forth. “I hate what they did to you. I hate how they made you feel. And I wish you’d give yourself a *break* , *Ya tayeb.*” He pulled away again, just far enough to wipe at Shadow’s face with his palm. It only helped to mat down the wet fur. “Listen. I knew Gerald. He was miserable to be around. I can’t even imagine what it was like for her without any friends. Being alone is… it’s hard. And while she was here, you gave her something really special.”

Shadow squeezed his eyes shut. “I didn’t give her anything.”

“You gave her a family. Trust me when I say that’s worth a lot in this world. She knew you loved her, Shadow. And I know that she wouldn’t want you to think she didn’t.”

It was enough to break the dam. Shadow hadn’t cried as much since that night, but he couldn’t seem to stop. And Stone kept holding him, murmuring something soft against the top of his head.

He cried until he couldn't anymore. Until his eyes were dry and he was thirsty and exhausted and his heart was sore.

It was lighter, too. Not by a lot. But just enough to breathe again.

Eventually, Stone asked, "You wanna go back to bed?"

Shadow shook his head.

"Yeah, I figured. You wanna go downstairs with me?"

Shadow nodded.

"You want to try on your own?"

Shadow nodded again, shifted, and then stared down at his cast. "Next time," said Stone, offering his arms, and Shadow let himself be hoisted up, Stone's hands beneath his legs and back to support the weight of the cast, and relaxed into strong arms as they left the guest room. A short trip down the stairs and he was being deposited in a chair at the dining room table. The sky was still pitch black beyond the windows and the hanging fixture above the table was dimmed, but the table itself was full. Fabric, thread, scissors and pincushions lay across the wood, with a sewing machine positioned at the opposite end.

A glass of water was placed in front of him.

He brought it to his lips, soothed his dry throat, before asking. "...Have you been up this whole time?"

"Oh. Uh." Stone stood at the coffee machine, one hand on the handle of the pot. "Maybe. Don't worry about it." He finished filling the mug on the counter.

"Stone…"

"I had work to do. And I couldn't sleep anyway."

Shadow narrowed his eyes. "I think all the coffee might've had something to do with that."

"I've only had half of- I said don't worry about it." Stone took a hurried sip from his mug, winced as it more-than-likely burned his tongue, and then brought it with him to the sewing machine.

Shadow felt like maybe he *should* worry about it, but he also wasn't sure it was his place to worry. Stone was an adult, after all. Still, it niggled at some place in the back of his brain. He decided to leave it there for now, and revisit it later. Instead he asked, "What, um, what sort of work are you doing?"

"Little bit of everything." Stone took another large sip of coffee, setting it down at his elbow and pointedly ignoring the disapproving look from Shadow. He picked up a small jacket and an already threaded needle. "I'm fixing up something for Maddie. Well. For Maddie, for

Sonic . He got too excited and his quills apparently went rogue." Just for Shadow to see, Stone stuck a finger through one of the stabbed bits of fabric.

"So it's Sonic's? He gets to wear that?"

"At least for the first twenty minutes so their grandparents can take pictures, I'm told."

Shadow watched as Stone patched up fabric by hand. "That's… cool."

"You think?" Stone glanced over.

Shadow shrugged shyly. "It sounds nice to do something like that with other people." He'd always been the center of attention in the worst of ways. The experiment. The monster. The weapon.

Looking at the little suit on the table -the small part the three brothers got to take part in with the rest of their family- made his stomach clench.

"Yeah. I think so, too." Stone tied off the thread. He showed Shadow the jacket with a quiet "ta da!"

It was like the holes had never been there. Shadow grinned. "Groovy."

"You know, I think that's the best compliment I've ever gotten!" Sonic's jacket was put down, and then Stone was pulling squares and rectangles of fabric towards himself.

"Is that for Sonic, too?"

"Nah. This is a personal project." He threaded the sewing machine and turned it on. It made a soft *tch-tch-tch* noise as he worked. "With the week we've all had, this is my way of winding down. Just a hobby, I guess."

Shadow watched him, eyes following the movement of Stone's hands. "I've never had a hobby."

It was so soft, so wistful, that Stone had to pause his work to reorient himself back to earth. "I guess we'll have to change that then, huh?"

"Really?" Shadow blinked his huge eyes up at Stone.

"Sure. It's good to have something that's just for you."

"I don't think I know how to do much…"

"That's alright, too. We can just try things out until you find something you like."

Shadow continued to watch him. He pointed towards Stone's hands. In a voice so small Stone nearly missed it, Shadow asked; "Can I try that?"

Stone paused. He looked down at his hands. Then back up at Shadow. “Yeah, kiddo. You absolutely can.”

It took some balancing to get Shadow standing on a chair with his cast. Stone helped him move the fabric beneath the needle, explaining how it worked. That this was advanced, but he could work his way up.

It wasn’t Shadow’s *thing*, he decided (and he told Stone as much, almost guiltily, to which Stone laughed kindly and explained that he was just glad Shadow had given it a try), but he liked working with his hands. He stuck with it enough to at least help Stone put together panels and then helped to sew buttons onto spots Stone marked with chalk.

They came out a little crooked, but when Stone fawned over his work, Shadow’s quills puffed up behind him.

“We’ll get you to try knitting next, maybe.” Stone guided Shadow’s hands again the second part of the project, its other half lying on the table, waiting to be ironed. “Maybe pottery?” He turned off the machine to turn the creation inside out.

Beside him, Shadow bit his lip. He thought about nightmares and warm reassurances and stars, and swallowed. “Maybe…” he hesitated. “Maybe I could try guitar?”

Stone beamed. “I clocked a music store in town while I went down for groceries. We’ll take a trip after Thanksgiving. Sounds good?”

Shadow let out a breath. “Yeah,” he said. “Sounds good.”

“Good.” Stone turned what he’d been working on inside out, holding it out with his left hand and reached for the other half with his right. “Now - what do you think about these?”

It was a pair of pants and a jacket. Smaller than Stones, just about the same size as the one he’d sewn up earlier. It was made of the torn up remains of Stone’s suit and it only took one look for Shadow to decide it was beautiful. A little like a still glowing ember; the outside deep black, and the silkier inside burning red.

“Wow.”

“You like it?”

Shadow nodded. He reached out, hesitating until Stone grinned and held them out encouragingly. It was light and soft. “Who is it for?”

Stone almost choked on the sip of coffee he’d started to take. “Wha-? It’s for *you*.”

The jacket nearly slipped from his fingers, and he tightened his grip. “Me?”

“Well yeah. I didn’t- I mean, the other boys will be wearing *theirs*.” Stone retook his sip. “I didn’t, yunno, want you to feel left out.”

Shadow breathed out a soft, “Oh.” He held it out and ran his thumb along a seam. “So… I can borrow it. For the holiday?”

Stone laughed softly. “No, you can *keep* it. For the *forever*. Or until you grow out of it.”

For the forever.

When was the last time Shadow had let himself dare to wonder about the future further than a few weeks? He could only recall one instance, in a field of wildflowers, under the stars, with a person he’d thought he’d get to spend that future with.

And when was the last thing he’d ever had something that was all *his?*

He thought he’d cried himself dry earlier.

Apparently not.

Stone’s hand laid gently on his back. And then another appeared under Shadow’s nose, offering a handkerchief. He took it, and let Stone replace the jacket on the table.

It was hard to explain. Or, maybe it wasn’t. Maybe Shadow just didn’t want to speak the words into existence with that jacket sitting on the table so close to him. That *forever* never really worked out for him. That the last time he had *forever*, it was ripped away.

The part that was hard to explain; how this felt like it would hurt more when it all ended.

“Sorry,” Shadow sniffled.

Stone laughed kindly. “I’m a crier too. Put on any movie or a commercial with small animals, and I’m a soggy mess.” He gave Shadow a minute to wipe his face and went into the kitchen. There was the sound of water, and then Stone was back with a glass. He glanced at a clock on the wall. “I’d like to say it was past your bedtime, but I’m pretty sure we overshot that by a mile already.”

“Yeah,” Shadow laughed pathetically through another sniffle.

“So how would you feel about getting some shuteye? One of us should, at least.”

Shadow wiped his face again. He looked down at the pants. “You’re almost done?”

“Another twenty minutes or so, yeah. Why? You trying to enforce bedtime on all of us?” Shadow shrugged. Stone snorted and sighed, weary but endeared. “Yeah. I guess I could stand to actually sleep for a few hours. C’mon, kiddo.”

Shadow held the water, and Stone held Shadow, and they made their way quietly back up the steps together. It was a struggle to get Shadow settled back with his cast, untangling the covers at least twice when they caught on the bulky plaster. But eventually, Shadow was burrowing against the soft pillow, watching Stone shift his way onto the air mattress beside the bed.

The dark room fell into a steady quiet.

“Um? Stone?”

Stone chuckled softly. “Yeah, Shadow?”

“I don’t- you don’t need to make me a suit. It’s a lot of work.”

“Did you like it?”

“I- yes.”

“Did you want it?”

“…Yes.”

“Then I was happy to make it for you.”

The room fell quiet again.

“…Stone?”

“Yes, Shadow?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Stone?”

“Go to sleep, Shadow.”

“M’not tired.”

Shadow couldn’t see Stone in the dark, but he was pretty sure he could hear the man rolling his eyes.

Shadow opened his mouth. He had so much he wanted to say. But there were walls he’d built around himself, thick enough to bruise his knuckles. Knocking them down would hurt. He just knew they would. Because if he knocked them down, there was a chance this whole new *something* of a life would be plucked from his hands with a laugh and a prickly, *you really thought you’d get to keep this?*

He twisted the covers in his hands. “Stone?”

His only answer was a soft snore. Shadow shifted again. The walls twisted up inside him. He could deal with them for a few more days, until he could step back on his own.

So he closed his eyes and did his best to let sleep come.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The gang heads to Thanksgiving. All the boys are definitely hungry.

Maddie's thirsty.

Chapter Notes

Our buffer is definitely getting smaller, so updates will be once a week for just a little bit!

Hopefully it'll get smaller again soon now that we're nearing the final act!

Stone was up with the sun. He'd always been an early riser, but it was more than habit that had him shifting restlessly on the air mattress.

Shadow wasn't the only one plagued by dreams of the dead.

He wiped at his eyes with the cuff of Tom's borrowed sweatshirt, willing himself to get it together. It took longer than he would've liked.

But eventually he pushed himself up to sit, wondering if it was too early to go start the coffeemaker and finish his sewing. He twisted to look at the clock on the nightstand, and his eyes fell on the sleeping teenage hedgehog in the bed beside him.

Soundly sleeping, too, from the look of it.

He had the comforter balled up under his cheek, his features were smooth, and one ear was twitching intermittently. There was a little wet spot on the blanket next to his parted lips.

Stone's hand was inches from the boy's cheek before he even realized he'd reached out, and he drew his hand back in surprise.

What was he doing?

Being stupid, that's what. Projecting probably. He'd spent so many years trying to serve and protect a prickly personality with a penchant for red and black. Was it any wonder he was falling back into the habit? But Shadow didn't need a sidekick. He needed a family. Which was exactly what he would get, if Stone could just keep convincing him to stay.

To that end, he decided it was definitely time to get to work finishing up the suit. So he quietly crept to the door, pointedly ignoring how he lingered to watch the boy sleep for one long moment more.

Thanksgiving morning was a rush of voices and movement, and Shadow did his best to stay on the sidelines. There were calls of *Mom, have you seen-* and *Dad, I can't find* - and *I am telling Mother that you said-* and all of it sort of blended together.

It sounded like chaos.

And maybe a little like love.

Still, Shadow leaned against Stone's legs while the man helped to put on his suit jacket. He was wearing a shirt borrowed from Sonic, which had been a whole *thing* in itself. Mostly because Sonic had been more than happy to help him put it on, happily chatting away about something banal while Shadow watched Sonic's hands and tried not to let his face burst into very confusing flames.

"Looking pretty sharp!" Stone buttoned the suit jacket, smoothing out wrinkles in the shoulders.

Shadow looked down at himself. His cast was bulky and stuck out from the pant leg Stone had cut shorter to accommodate. He gave a shrug. "I guess," he muttered.

"What, you don't think so?" Stone looked up, catching someone's eye. "Hey, Sonic! Take a look at Shadow!"

Before Shadow could say anything, Sonic was zipping over in his own (newly fixed) suit and giving Shadow a look. The hedgehog beamed. "Oh, dude! Looking *good!"*

Shadow's face was on fire again. He choked on a cough. "Yeah?" he rasped.

"Totally. You look like John Wick!"

"Is that… good?"

Sonic nodded emphatically. "That's *very* good. Super, super cool."

Shadow wondered if anyone could see smoke coming out of his ears. "Cool," he squeaked. "Coolcoolcoolcoolcool."

From where he was fiddling with a button on the jacket, Stone snorted.

The only part of Shadow's suit that had been different was the tie, but the boys managed to negotiate their way into not wearing theirs. This was done through a combination of Tails' large eyes, well spoken arguments about how they looked like spies without them, and a barrage of compliments poured over Maddie when she walked down the stairs in a purple blouse, earrings, and makeup.

“I just think you should consider the fact that *Shadow* looks like a super cool spy,” Sonic had reasoned, giving Shadow’s shoulder a squeeze (and somehow not getting burned, despite the fact that Shadow was absolutely on fire with how close he was to Sonic, probably). “He looks super cool and handsome, and by the way, Mom, has anyone told you how *gorgeous* you’re looking this morning?”

“I have!” Knuckles shouted from across the room, offended. “Many times!”

Maddie rolled her eyes and sighed. “Remind me to sign you up for debate,” she told her middle child before relenting.

The last one down was Tom. Mostly because it had taken him time to put on his suit, insisting he could do it on his own while Maddie (and their three children) finished packing up food in Tupperware.

And also because the moment Stone saw him, he apparently couldn’t take it anymore. “Nope,” said Stone. “Absolutely not.”

Tom, standing at the bottom of the steps with his crutch on one arm, sling on the other, looked down at himself and then back up at Stone. “I mean, I know I’m kind of tied up with all the casts and stuff, but I think I clean up pretty good.”

“You look *fine* ,” said Knuckles from where he was texting Zoe on the couch.

Stone shook his head before popping into the kitchen. Maddie was chopping a final bag of peppers for a vegetable tray. She looked up when he asked, “You mind if I steal Tom for fifteen minutes?”

“Why?”

“Because he’s killing me,” said Stone. “I can’t watch him wear that suit, Maddie. I just can’t.”

Maddie flicked at Tails’ hand when it snuck up to try and grab a slice of pepper. “What’s wrong with his suit? It’s nice!”

Stone let out a long, trying breath.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she said, flicking at Tails’ hand again. “I have to finish this up anyway.”

“Great.” He turned on his heel before she could ask any followups and marched towards Tom. “Back upstairs,” he said, snapping his fingers. “I think I have a suit that’ll fit you.”

“What’s wrong with my suit?”

“You’re *killing me* , Thomas. You really are.”

Shadow let them go up alone (two in crutches on the stairs seemed unnecessary). Instead, he eased into a dining chair, and busied himself with wondering if ‘handsome’ had acquired a

new slang connotation in the last fifty years. It had to have. Men didn't call each other 'handsome' as far as he could remember. Women did. He specifically remembered a female researcher telling a male soldier he looked *'so handsome in that uniform'* , but none of the man's fellow soldiers would have done the same. He also specifically remembered Maria giggling and making kissing noises as they'd passed by the scene.

Thinking about it too hard had his face flaring hot again and so he forced himself to stop.

Thankfully there were lots of noises from upstairs to distract him.

The muffled voices of Stone and Thomas, and then Sonic's higher register joining the mix. Plenty of thumps. A bit of laughter. And then footsteps back on the stairs and then-

"Ta-daaaaa!" Sonic sang, appearing in the kitchen doorway first, doing jazz hands. "Preeesenting, the new and improved Donut Lord! Or should I say, The *Swag* Lord!"

Maddie snorted, eyes on her hands as she scooped sliced peppers into the Tupperware (giving one to Tails to appease him). "Your father always looks good, Sonic. I really don't see how much difference a new suit is going to-"

Tom appeared behind Sonic.

Maddie lost her grip on the Tupperware.

Thankfully Tails was right there to catch it before it spilled all over the floor. Her youngest laughed. "Whoa! When did James Bond get here?"

Knuckles looked up from his phone and blinked. Then he nodded curtly, said "Truly an impressive transformation," and returned to his phone.

Shadow found that he had to agree. The suit he'd been wearing before had been boxy and brown. Suitably formal for the occasion, but nothing worth noticing. The borrowed suit, however, practically demanded attention. A deep navy, the jacket cut sharply down his chest, acting as a frame for the matching vest. Tom shifted from his cast to a lone, newly shined oxford and fiddled with a borrowed maroon tie, smoothing it down.

"The shirt is mine, too," said Stone happily, ignoring Tom's eyeroll as he reached up to adjust the collar of the crisp, white dress shirt peeking out. "Mostly because he wanted to put a *t-shirt* underneath this."

"It was a nice t-shirt," grumbled Tom.

"Those words don't even belong in the same sentence. And wearing that with… with this?" Stone gestured to the whole of Tom. "It would be like serving chicken nuggets at a steakhouse."

"I like chicken nuggets."

"No, you don't," said Stone. He turned back towards Maddie, who had yet to realize that the peppers had fallen from her hand. Her hands were still out, holding invisible Tupperware.

“So? You like it?”

Maddie blinked. "What?"

"The suit," Stone repeated, huffing snippily. "I asked if you liked-"

"Yes," said Maddie. “Yup. Yup. Yes. The suit. I like- Yes. Totally.”

Shadow looked between them, as everyone in the kitchen fell into an awkward silence, and thought about the researcher and the soldier again.

“Mom!” It was Sonic that broke that silence when he yelled into the house from the porch. “Grandma’s texting me! She wants to know when we’re getting there!”

Maddie snapped back into action. “We’re leaving,” she said, quickly. “Right now!”

They loaded coolers full of food into the minivan. Well, Shadow was able to shoulder one totebag. The folks not on crutches did the heavy lifting. And then he was helped into the back row of seats, on some sort of seat-on-top-of-a-seat, between Knuckles and Stone. As Sonic climbed into a similar contraption in the middle row, he twisted back to smile in Shadow’s direction. “Sorry ‘bout the booster. I know it’s not cool, but Mom an’ Dad are sticklers for road safety.”

Tails chimed in, “It’s so the seatbelt doesn’t choke you.”

Shadow hadn’t realized it was anything worth worrying about, so he just shrugged. “Seems reasonable.”

“See, bud?” Tom said from the passenger seat, where he was already fiddling with his phone, connecting it to bluetooth . “Your cool new friend says it’s ‘reasonable’.”’

“That is because safety is the most important,” said Knuckles sagely. “Your buckle must be clicked, or you will have to deal with the law!”

“It’s just click it or ticket, pal,” said Tom, before turning around to loudly whisper “He just started drivers ed,” to Stone. “Keep us in your thoughts.”

Stone nodded solemnly.

Shadow was about to remark on this (aliens were allowed to drive cars?), when the car speakers began playing a folksy guitar riff that he thought maybe he recognized. And then when a man’s nasally voice remarked, *‘This song is called “Alice’s Restaurant”. It’s about Alice…and the restaurant’* and he was 100% sure. “Hey…”

“Ugh, Dad, really?” Sonic groaned.

“It’s a Thanksgiving tradition!” Tom said. “Now shhh.”

Sonic turned again, looking apologetic, but Shadow’s recognition must’ve been plain on his face, because he quirked an eyebrow, clamped his mouth shut, and twisted back to face

forward. Shadow felt Stone's eyes on him, but he was too busy being sent back to a long ago November afternoon sitting in front of Maria's radio to do anything but close his eyes and let himself settle in there.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

A Wachowski Family Thanksgiving

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday folks! As Humanity mentioned last chapter, our backlog has dwindled so we're switching to a once a week update schedule instead of twice, so expect new chapters up on Fridays going forward. Hopefully they're worth the wait! ^_^

“Well aren’t you just the most handsome group of boys I ever laid my eyes on!” Rosie already had her phone in hand when the Wachowskis (and friends) ambled in, arms filled with Tupperware.

“You’ve got about fifteen minutes, tops,” Maddie whispered to Rosie. “I’m pretty sure I saw Tails picking at his tie already.”

“Copy that,” said Rosie with a nod, before directing the ragtag group of kids to the dining room. “Your grandpa’s finishing table setting. Go and be useful.”

There was chatter of hey Grandpa and Grandfather, you look well.

Rosie paused to turn around and looked at the two guests standing awkwardly in the foyer beside her son and daughter-in-law. “ You must be the Shadow that stayed in our barn.”

He shifted from foot to foot. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“None of that. It’s Miss Rosie, alright? I know you already met my husband?”

Shadow nodded. “Yes ma’-Rosie. Miss Rosie.”

She laughed. “Well, we’re happy to see you out here instead of with the horses. No offense to them, of course, but I don’t need them around my Thanksgiving table.” She glanced up at the man behind Shadow. “And you are-?”

“Stone,” said Stone.

“Ma, we told you about him,” Tom said.

“Oh yes, the henchman, right,” she nodded, as if his former profession had been ‘accountant’. “Well, come in, come in, the both of you. No need to lurk in doorways now.” She waved them in and then strode off after the other kids. “We’re just waiting on your sister, Madeline, and the deputy. And the turkey’s got another thirty minutes on it, at least.”

“I can help in the kitchen, if you want.”

Rosie blinked and then beamed at Stone. “Well, aren't you just a sweetheart? I won’t turn away an extra set of hands, especially while I get a picture of the kids. You know your way around a stove?”

“Ma, the man cooks like stoves owes him money. He’s good .”

“Tall, handsome, and he can cook?” Rosie winked. “Don’t know how no one’s put a ring on you, sweetheart.” And then she snapped her fingers and was ushering him into the kitchen, calling out directions. She paused at the kitchen entrance to turn around and look at Shadow. “Follow the boys into the dining room, honey. I need you in a picture, too.”

“Oh, I don’t-”

But Rosie was already gone, shouting directions about canned pumpkin like a drill sergeant,

“Don’t try to say no to her,” said Tom.

Maddie snorted. “He’s right. First Thanksgiving I visited here, Rosie had me standing in all the family pictures. She swears up and down now that it was her sixth sense ringing, telling her I’d be a part of the family sooner or later.” She rolled her eyes affectionately before kneeling down beside Shadow. “If it makes you uncomfortable, you really don’t have to.”

Shadow fiddled with a button on his jacket. “It sounds… fine,” he muttered.

Maddie looked like she was ready to say something else, but her phone ringing pulled her away. He heard her talking to someone named Rachel.

Tom took a turn hobbling up beside Shadow, poking at his side gently with his crutch. “Maddie’s right. I can tell my mom so. She’d love to have you in the pictures, but she won’t be heartbroken if you say no.”

Shadow thought about it again, peering off towards the dining room. Warm light was spilling out, and noises of the three brothers chatting made it all that much warmer. “I think it sounds nice,” he said, finally.

“Alright then. Let’s get a move on before my mom starts threatening us with no dessert.”

“Would she do that?”

“To you? Probably not. To me? Absolutely.”

It was enough of a joke to make Shadow let out a soft tee-hee of a laugh, and he followed after Tom, the two of them walking awkwardly in their casts into the dining room.

It wasn't awful, standing for pictures. Maria had had a Polaroid that she carted around the base, but her style of photography was more artistic, more spontaneous. But on occasion, she would swing an arm around his neck, press their cheeks together and tell him to 'say cheese!' And standing in front of the senior Wachowskis Thanksgiving table in their suits was a bit akin to that. He spent most of the five minutes half-dreading, half-hoping that Sonic might pull the same move Maria used to, and then being half-relieved, half-disappointed when he didn't.

And then the aunt and the deputy arrived, with a human child in tow and they had to do it all over again. This time they let Shadow sit in one of the dining chairs, as the crutch was starting to chafe his armpit, which was better. And this time, they all squeezed in around him and Sonic put a hand on the seat and their pinkies touched and he had to subtly tuck his hands under his thighs lest his quills catch fire and ruin the suit Stone had made.

The new girl, the cousin, was called Jojo ("It's really Joelle, but I like Jojo" she told him), and he immediately liked her. She wore a suit too, a deep eggplant purple one with a glittery bowtie and Chuck Taylors to match. She signed his cast with a heart above the second 'j' and with a pang in his chest he realized she reminded him of another thirteen year old girl he used to know.

There were one or two more pictures after that as the family grew in numbers. Shadow stood back, leaning against the wall. Stone was similarly out of shot. He offered to take a picture for the family so Rosie and Big T could step into the portrait themselves.

The family smiled for the click. When it was done, Rosie stepped towards Stone with a happy, "Your turn!"

He lowered the camera, as frozen as the picture he'd just taken. "Sorry…? I don't-"

"Don't be silly, darlin'. Tom, honey-"

"On it," said Tom, grabbing Stone by the arm and dragging him roughly between Maddie and himself. "Shadow, you too!"

Shadow didn't even have a chance to say anything before he was being helped to wobble forward on his cast to stand just in front of Stone's legs. When he tipped, a little off balance, Stone leaned down and grabbed his shoulder. "Got you, kid."

Shadow breathed out and glanced up at Stone with a shy grin.

Beside him Sonic groaned. "Can we please just take this so we can eat! I'm so close to ripping this jacket clean off."

"Don't you dare," Maddie said through her teeth, smile fixed.

There was a click, and then Big T was announcing that he'd be eating all the appetizers alone if no one else came to get them, soon.

And that was that.

He'd never attended a proper holiday gathering at the base, but the way the Wachowskis celebrated wasn't much different from the way they operated on a non-holiday, as far as he could tell. The only difference was the way everyone was dressed and how fancily the table was laid out. There were cloth napkins in bronze rings, a centerpiece full of seasonal flowers, and placecards with their names written on them.

He'd thought the point of the gathering was the meal, and perhaps it was, but no one was in a hurry to get straight to it. In fact, they spent a solid chunk of time doing what Knuckles referred to as 'pre-gaming'. Which, from what Shadow could see, meant eating a bunch before you sat down to dinner.

The 'Charred Board of Many Cheeses' was out on the kitchen table and everyone milled about in its vicinity, snagging cubes of cheese and sausage with toothpicks and fingers as the conversation flowed easily.

From the seat he'd taken in a chair up against the wall, Shadow watched them all.

He watched Sonic and Jojo swap stories about school and new video games.

He watched Rachel and Maddie discuss the real estate market in Green Hills.

He watched the deputy (Wade, was it?) tease Stone with what he assumed was an inside joke involving bagels.

It was hectic, to be sure.

But nice, too. In a way.

Occasionally Sonic would lope over to refill his plate and ask, "You good?" And he could nod honestly. He was good. Observing them all, while not feeling like an unwelcome intruder, was quickly becoming one of his favorite pastimes.

It was during this observation time that he noticed that, even as she conversed with her sister or gave reheating instructions to her mother-in-law, Maddie kept darting glances at her husband. Fleeting at first, but then longer. Like he was distracting her. But all Tom seemed to be doing was holding court at the kitchen counter, laughing with his deputy or reminiscing with his father. Not much distracting about that.

And yet.

Eventually, one of her longer glances managed to catch his attention. And Shadow watched as, from across the room, they seemed to have a silent conversation with their eyes.

It was fascinating.

A raised eyebrow here, a slight head tilt there, and then Tom was retrieving his crutch and easing his way over to his wife. As soon as he was in arm's reach she snaked out a hand and smoothed down his tie (even though it was perfectly smooth already). He dipped his face close to hers and murmured, "Did I ever show you my football trophies?"

“Hm.” Her eyes stayed focused on his lips. “I can’t remember. Are they up in your old room?”

“Yup.”

“Well.” The hand she had on his tie got a firmer grip. “Since we’re here. Might as well.”

“Might as well.”

And then she was pulling him by the tie out of the kitchen, slowly so he could follow without tripping on his crutch.

Sonic, who was digging in the cooler nearest the doorway, asked. “Where’re you guys going?”

“Football trophies,” Tom said, eyes still on his wife.

“Lame.” He rolled his eyes. “Who wants to see those?”

“I do,” Maddie said, still tugging him along. “Be right back.”

And then the pair of them were gone, the ka-thunk, ka-thunk, ka-thunk of Tom’s crutch on the stairs echoing through the house.

Sonic blinked, turning back to the cooler. “That was… weird.”

“So weird,” agreed Tails.

Knuckles, fists full of Jellyberry grapes, snorted.

Sonic whipped around, eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Nothing, brother.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!”

“It means you do not need to know,” said Knuckles.

“It’s nothin’ you need to worry about, Darlin’,” said Rosie, squinting to read the meat thermometer she’d stuck in the turkey. “That’s all.”

“You really don’t,” agreed Rachel, helping Jojo pop open a La Croix.

“But Mom’s seen trophies before. I’ve got tons of ‘em! That’s all I’m saying!”

“Maybe she’s tired of seeing yours,” Jojo offered, ducking a grape Sonic skillfully tossed at her head. She nabbed it in the air and made a show of crunching it between her teeth.

“Who could ever get tired of seeing mine?”

Big T laughed into his wine. “Sonic?”

“Grandpa?”

“Sonic, son. Don’t worry about it.”

Sonic rolled his eyes and scrubbed his face. “Whatever,” he said. “Don’t tell me.”

Knuckles crossed to the cooler, dug himself out a Dr. Pepper, and looked at Sonic. “Mother’s Day.”

“Huh?”

“Mother’s. Day.”

“...what?”

Knuckles popped the top of his soda. “I know I need not elaborate further. And if I must, then perhaps you truly should just ‘not worry about it’, as we have said.”

Shadow sympathized as Sonic groaned in confusion. He was even more confused a short while later, when Miss Rosie announced that dinner was ready. The pair of them returned, holding hands. A few of Maddie’s braids had come loose from her updo, and there was a lipstick smear on Tom’s collar.

Silently he wondered what on earth Mother’s Day had to do with necking. He figured he’d ask Sonic later. Maybe traditions had been updated since the 70’s. Then again, what did he know?

There was another awkward moment while Big T was spooning sweet potato casserole onto Tails’ plate, and Maddie was trying to convince Sonic, unsuccessfully, to keep his suit jacket on. Shadow was trying not to inhale brussels by the sprout, remembering the manners that he and Stone had gone over a few times.

And then Rosie, giving Knuckles an entire turkey leg to himself, looked up at Stone.

“Now tell me, young man. Not that we’re not thrilled you’re here blessin’ us with your culinary expertise. But what are you doin’ here with us instead a’ with your own kin?”

Stone paused with his wine glass halfway to his lips. “Oh. Uh. Well.”

“Mom,” Tom chided.

She looked ready to chide right back, when realization dawned on her face. “Oh heavens, I put my foot in it, didn’t I?” She turned apologetic eyes to Stone. “I’m so sorry, hon, I shouldn’t be pryin’-”

“No, no, it’s okay.” He lowered the glass. “It just threw me. Can’t remember the last time anyone asked about my personal life.” He watched the straw-colored liquid swirl around the goblet. “I haven’t been in touch with my family in years. They didn’t exactly approve of my, um, my life choices.”

Sonic frowned. He twisted to look towards his parents and then back at Stone. “What choices? Or- was it the henchman thing? I guess that’s not great but I mean, I don’t think my parents would kick me out for that. Right?” He looked back at his parents again, but his open expression quickly turned down when he noticed their faces. “Did- did I say something wrong?”

“No, baby. You didn’t.” Maddie reached over to grab her son’s hand. “I don’t think he means that.”

Stone cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. “This was before the whole… henchman…thing.”

Sonic frowned. He looked towards his brothers, both of them just as puzzled, and then towards an equally-as-confused Shadow.

“What kind of choice?” Tails turned his huge eyes onto his parents and Stone.

“I don’t think he really means a choice, bud.”

Stone shifted again, chewing his bottom lip. He glanced towards Rosie and Big T nervously.

“I believe I have read about this in my book.” Knuckles piped up, raising his turkey leg to draw their attention. “That some incorrectly believe certain… parts of a person are choices that they make?”

“What kind of parts?” Sonic wanted to know.

“The parts that determine whether you prefer a partner like my Zoe… or one like Dr. Robotnik.”

It was clear the moment Sonic understood. His shoulders drooped and he struggled to find something to say, looking back towards his parents. He looked devastated. “Oh.”

Beside Stone, Shadow was looking up at the man with new, sad eyes. He reached out with a hand, not sure what to do, but looking like he wanted to curl himself tight around the man. Instead, he drew his hand back and leaned his head softly against Stone’s arm.

Across the table Rosie took her napkin off her lab and threw it down onto the table beside her plate. Her chair squeaked as it was pushed backwards, and her socked feet somehow stomped when she got up. Stone shrank in his chair, looking ready to apologize or to excuse himself and quietly slip away.

Not that Rosie would have let him.

Before he could say anything, Stone was being swept up in a hug. Still sitting, his head was pressed into her shoulder. He froze, arms stiffly held out on either side of her. The wine glass was still in his right hand, liquid dangerously swishing towards the rim.

“I’m sorry they didn’t know the good thing they were letting go.” Rosie still sounded furious. But her hug was warm. “You helped my family, though. So as far as I’m concerned, you’re

one of ours."

Still squeezed against her, Stone's posture softened. Big T reached across the table to pluck the wine glass from Stone's hand, giving him a wink. "I'm inclined to agree with my wife. Welcome to the family, son."

Stone's arms slowly wound around Rosie. He sniffled. "Yeah," he said, doing his best not to choke. "Okay."

Rosie pulled back long enough to wipe at his face. "You bring whoever you want to our table, you hear me?"

"Okay," Stone said again. He fumbled for his pocket square, dabbing at his eyes. As Rosie backed away with a pat on his shoulder, he felt the weight on his arm go heavier. Shadow was leaning against him, still. Looking up at him. "I'm good, kid." He refolded and replaced the square. He flicked Shadow's nose and ran a hand across his quills where they'd anxiously puffed out.

And gently, oh so gently, Shadow's arms lifted up and wrapped around whatever part of Stone's torso they could reach. The move was unsure, and Shadow's arms shook, but it was clear enough to anyone who saw what it was. Shadow hid his face against Stone's side, saving him from looking back at anyone around the table.

And keeping them from seeing the shy smile when one of Stone's arms wrapped around Shadow's shoulders and tugged him closer.. "I'm good." Stone said again. "Promise."

Across the table, Wade blew his nose in his napkin, while Rachel rubbed his back. "I just love this family so much."

End Notes

Humanities_Handbag here! A quick additional note: The reception has been so incredible on my individual fic, and so I'm pleased to let you know that the next chapter of the Five Stages will be out, hopefully, soon.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!